

**Title Page**

**The Encrypted Object: The Secret World of Sixties Sculpture**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the work of artists Lucas Samaras, Lee Bontecou and HC Westermann, specifically the way in which they have been excluded from dominant accounts of 1960s sculptural practice. I explore the ways in which a theory of 'secrecy' provides a framework through which to think about each of these artists. Chapter one focuses on Samaras's use of small-scale boxes in relation to his dialogue with the Minimal cubic structure, whilst the second chapter examines the structures of Bontecou in terms of their 'secrecy'. Working from welded steel armatures, Bontecou developed a unique practice of stretching dirty, worn skeins of fabric over the metal structure, always with a gaping hole backed with black felt, a disturbing void ~~(that)~~ around which the surface is organised and the spectatorial encounter disturbed.

Unlike the voracious mode of looking Bontecou's works engender, or the partial, fragmented 'peering' offered by Samaras's boxes, Westermann's works require a type of looking that has more in common with the physical act of 'drifting'. I cast both the viewing experience and the mode of construction Westermann's works demand, in terms of 'bricolage' and 'braconnage' (or 'poaching'). The concluding chapter analyses the role of the artistic homage and notion of influence, taking as model the work of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok on haunting and secrecy in relation to the work of Westermann alongside that of Bruce Nauman and Rachel Whiteread. In chapter four I introduce the idea of the 'phantom', as a way of thinking through the problems of inheritance at work in the artistic homage in terms of a series of ruptures, using Abraham and Torok's concept of the 'transgenerational phantom', in which familial secrets are unwittingly inherited by one's ancestors. In this final chapter, I attempt to undermine the usual way in which influence and artistic lineage are understood.

## CONTENTS

### Volume One

Title Page:	p. 1
Abstract:	p. 2
Contents:	p. 3
Acknowledgments:	p. 4
List of Illustrations:	p. 6
Introduction:	
<i>The Secret World of Sixties Sculpture</i>	p. 13
Chapter one:	
<i>'Materialized Secrets: Lucas Samaras and Small-Scale Boxes</i>	p. 34
Chapter two:	
<i>Topographies of the void, or Lee Bontecou's Unspecified Objects</i>	p. 82
Chapter three:	
<i>Bric-a-Brac: The Objects of H.C. Westermann</i>	p. 125
Chapter four:	
<i>Haunting/Homage: Bruce Nauman and the Case of Westermann's Ear</i>	p. 170
Bibliography:	p. 216

### Volume Two

Title Page	p. 1
Contents	p. 2
Illustrations:	p. 3

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Chapter one

#### 'Materialized Secrets': Lucas Samaras and Small-Scale Boxes

- 1.1 Lucas Samaras, *Box No. 48*, 1966, mixed media, 11 x 9.25 x 14.5in (closed), Private collection, New York
- 1.2 Lucas Samaras, *Untitled*, 1961, Liquid aluminium, Sculpmetal, and straightened safety pin, 24 x 18 x 6in. Collection of the artist
- 1.3 Photograph of Donald Judd's apartment at 101 Spring Street, New York, fifth floor, view of bedroom with works by John Chamberlain, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and Lucas Samaras, bed by Donald Judd
- 1.4 Photograph of Donald Judd's apartment at 101 Spring Street, New York, fifth floor (Detail), view of bedroom with works by John Chamberlain, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and Lucas Samaras, bed by Donald Judd
- 1.5 Carl Andre, *Eight Cuts*, 1967, bricks, photographed at Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1967, Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, Switzerland
- 1.6 Lucas Samaras, *Floor Piece (in sixteen parts)*, 1961, Sculpmetal, 48 x 48in. Collection of the artist
- 1.7 Lucas Samaras, *Untitled (Shoe Box)*, 1965, wood, wool, yarn, shoe, pins, cotton, paint, 10.5 x 15.5 x 11in. The Saatchi Collection
- 1.8 Lucas Samaras, *Box No. 8*, 1963, mixed media, 11 x 15 x 8in (closed), Private collection, New York
- 1.9 Lucas Samaras, *Untitled (face box)*, 1963, wood, photographs, pins, and wool, 10.5 x 15 x 18.5in. Private collection, Los Angeles
- 1.10 André Breton, *Page-Object*, 1934, wooden box, glass eyes, bait, 3 x 4 x 3in. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome
- 1.11 Marcel Duchamp, *Boîte-en-valise*, 1935-41; 1941 version, 15 x 14 x 3in. Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art
- 1.12 Jasper Johns, *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara*, 1961-70, wood, lead, brass, rubber, sand and Sculpmetal, 6.25 x 19 x 6 x 13in. Collection of the artist
- 1.13 Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*, 1961, wood, tape recorder and cassette, 9 x 9 x 9in. Seattle Art Museum
- 1.14 Marcel Duchamp, *With Hidden Noise*, 1916, ball of twine in brass frame, Height: 12in. Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art
- 1.15 Lucas Samaras, *Box No. 3*, 1963, wood, pins, rope and stuffed bird, 24.5 x 11.5 x 10.5in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1.16 Lucas Samaras, *Cornell Size*, *Arts Magazine*, May, 1967, p. 46
- 1.17 Mel Bochner, *Wrap: Portrait of Eva Hesse*, 1966, pen and ink on graph paper, Diameter: 4in. Private collection
- 1.18 Lucas Samaras, *Paper Bag No. 3*, 1962, paper bag with paintings and scratched mirror, 31 x 22 x 9in. Collection of the artist
- 1.19 Lucas Samaras, *Room No.2*, wood and mirror, 8 x 10 x 8ft. Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo
- 1.20 Lucas Samaras, *Room No.1*, 1964, mixed media, 10 x 15 x 17.5ft. Destroyed

- 1.21 Eva Hesse, *Inside I*, 1967, painted papier-mâché over wood and twine, 12 x 12 x 12in. The Estate of Eva Hesse
- 1.22 Eva Hesse, *Inside II*, 1967, painted papier-mâché over wood and weights, 5 x 7 x 7in. The Estate of Eva Hesse
- 1.23 Eva Hesse, *Accession II*, 1967/69, galvanised steel with plastic tubing, 31 x 31 x 31in. Detroit Institute of Arts
- 1.24 Lucas Samaras, *Box No. 11*, 1963, mixed media, 10 x 13 x 8in. Private collection, Virginia
- 1.25 Lucas Samaras, *Untitled (small box)*, 1960, wood, plastered crepe paper and feathers, 11 x 6 x 7in. Collection of the artist
- 1.26 Lucas Samaras, *Untitled*, 1960, wood and plastered cloth, 9 x 11 x 8in. Collection of the artist
- 1.27 Eva Hesse, *Laocoon*, 1966, acrylic paint, cloth-covered cord, wire, and papier-mâché over plastic pipe, 120 x 24 x 24in. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio
- 1.28 Lucas Samaras, *Untitled*, c.1954, pencil on paper, 3 x 4.5in. Collection of the artist
- 1.29 Eva Hesse, *Accession*, 1967, watercolour, metallic gouache, and pencil on paper, 11.5 x 16in. The Estate of Eva Hesse
- 1.30 Eva Hesse, *Accession*, 1968, watercolour, gouache and pencil, 16 x 11.25in. Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles
- 1.31 Lucas Samaras, *Dinner No. 4 and Box No. 4*, 1963, mixed media, 10.5 x 14 x 10.5 in. Private collection, Chicago
- 1.32 Lucas Samaras, *Sketch for Boxes*, 1966, ink on paper, 14 x 17in. Collection of the artist

## Chapter two

### Topographies of the void, or Lee Bontecou's Unspecified Objects

- 2.1 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1959, welded steel, wire and cloth, 59 x 59 x 18in. Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 2.2 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1958-59, steel, canvas, and velvet, 13 x 13.5, 12in. Collection of the artist
- 2.3 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1957-58, soot on paper, 27.5 x 39in. Collection of the artist
- 2.4 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1958-59, steel, muslin, silk, brass, screen wire, 4 x 4 x 4in. Collection of the artist
- 2.5 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1958-59, mixed media. Collection of the artist
- 2.6 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1958-59, mixed media. Collection of the artist
- 2.7 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1966, welded metal and canvas, 55 x 66.5 x 8.5in. New School for Social Research, New York
- 2.8 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (Detail)*, 1966, welded metal and canvas, 55 x 66.5 x 8.5in. New School for Social Research, New York
- 2.9 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (Detail)*, 1966, welded metal and canvas, 55 x 66.5 x 8.5in. New School for Social Research, New York
- 2.10 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, c.1962, canvas, blue jeans, wire, welded metal, 20.5 x 60 x 8.5in. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York



- 2.11 Photograph of Lee Bontecou at work, taken from the cover of the catalogue for her show at the Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, Germany, 1968
- 2.12 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1960, steel, canvas, cloth, and wire, 6ft x 56 x 20in. Private Collection, New York
- 2.13 John Chamberlain, *Essex*, 1960, painted metal, 9ft x 7ft 6in. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York
- 2.14 Bruce Conner, *The Child*, 1959-60, wax figure with nylon, cloth, metal, and twine in a high chair, 34.5 x 17 x 16.5in. Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 2.15 Harold Paris, *Elder*, 1960, bronze, 33 x 18 x 20in. Location unknown
- 2.16 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1966, painted iron, 73 x 88 x 9in. Guggenheim Museum, New York
- 2.17 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (Detail), 1966, painted iron, 73 x 88 x 9in. Guggenheim Museum, New York
- 2.18 Lee Bontecou, *1964*, plexiglass turret and mixed media, 72 x 264in, installed in the lobby of the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center, New York, and *1964*, colour reproduction
- 2.19 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1966, mixed mediums, 78.5 x 119 x 31 in. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
- 2.20 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1960, welded metal and canvas, 9.5 x 8 x 4in. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York
- 2.21 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (aviator), 1961, graphite on paper, 22.5 x 28.5in. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
- 2.22 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, early 1960s, steel, 16.5 x 12 x 4in. Collection of the artist
- 2.23 Lee Bontecou, *Designs for Sculpture*, 1964, graphite on paper, 28 x 20in. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York
- 2.24 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1964, graphite and soot on linen, 16 x 16in. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York
- 2.25 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, lithograph, frontispiece for Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, Germany, 1968
- 2.26 Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1960, watercolour, ink, and felt-tip pen on paper, 4.5 x 6in. National Gallery of Art, Washington
- 2.27 Eva Hesse, *Hang-Up*, 1966, acrylic paint on cloth over wood; acrylic paint on cord over steel tube, 72 x 84 x 78in. The Art Institute of Chicago
- 2.28 Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale*, 1963, oil on canvas, 146 x 114cm. Private collection, Venice
- 2.29 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961, welded steel, wire, canvas, 80.25 x 89 x 35in. Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 2.30 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961, iron, welded steel, copper wire, canvas, velvet fabric, 56 x 40 x 21.5in. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- 2.31 Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961, canvas and steel, 72 x 66.25 x 26in. Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 2.32 *Roman Holiday*, film still with Audrey Hepburn, directed by William Wyler, 1953
- 2.33 *Roman Holiday*, film still with Gregory Peck, directed by William Wyler, 1953
- 2.34 Lee Bontecou, installation shot, Leo Castelli Gallery, 1960

- 2.35 'Tuyères? Non, sculpture...' photograph of Bontecou's work at Documenta 3, Kassel, Germany, 1964

### Chapter three

#### Bric-a-Brac: The Objects of H.C. Westermann

- 3.1 H.C. Westermann, *Korea*, 1965, pine, glass, rope, brass, and found objects, 34.5 x 17 x 9in. Private collection, New York
- 3.2 H.C. Westermann, *Secrets*, 1964, American walnut, brass, 7 x 11 x 8.5in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 3.3 George Bloom, *Think of me Kindly*, one of a twelve boxes, 1894, hardwoods, glass, 5 x 9 x 6in. Private collection
- 3.4 H.C. Westermann, *Cliff Made of Tools*, 1958, ink on paper, 10 x 7in. Collection of Joanna Beall Westermann
- 3.5 H.C. Westermann, *Mysteriously Abandoned New Home*, 1958, pine, birch, vermilion, redwood, glass, paint, and wheels, 51 x 25 x 25in. The Art Institute of Chicago
- 3.6 H.C. Westermann, *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum*, 1958, Douglas fir plywood, pine, tar, enamel, glass, antique die-cast brass and cast-lead doll head, metal, brass, mirror, and paper decoupage, 48 x 29 x 28in. Private collection, San Francisco
- 3.7 H.C. Westermann, *Untitled (oil can)*, 1962, pine, hemp rope, galvanised sheet metal, aluminium alkyd enamel, and metal, 22.25 x 14 x 12.25in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 3.8 H.C. Westermann, *Evil New War God (S.O.B)*, 1958, partially chromium-plated brass, 17 x 9.5 x 11in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 3.9 H.C. Westermann, *Angry Young Machine*, 1959, pine, plywood, galvanised iron pipe and fittings, faucet handle, cast-lead soldier, aluminium alkyd enamel, and wheels, 90 x 27 x 28in. The Art Institute of Chicago
- 3.10 H.C. Westermann, *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea* (open), 1958, pine, bottle caps, cast-tin toys, glass, metal, brass, ebony, and enamel, 56.5 x 38 x 14.5in. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
- 3.11 H.C. Westermann, *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea* (closed), 1958, pine, bottle caps, cast-tin toys, glass, metal, brass, ebony, and enamel, 56.5 x 38 x 14.5in. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
- 3.12 H.C. Westermann, *Brinkmanship*, 1959, plywood, electroplated metal, bottle cap, and string, 23.25 x 24 x 20in. Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution
- 3.13 H.C. Westermann, *The Pillar of Truth*, 1962, red oak, pine, walnut, enamel, cast aluminium, and metal spring, 25 x 7.5 x 8in. Allan Frumkin, Inc.
- 3.14 H.C. Westermann, *Trophy for a Gasoline Apollo*, 1961, wood, hydrostone, enamel, and plastic bumpers, 33 x 8.5 x 6.25in. Private collection
- 3.15 Ed Ruscha, study for *Bloated Empire*, 1997, #1, acrylic on canvasboard, Collection of the artist
- 3.16 H.C. Westermann, *Walnut Box*, 1964, walnut, walnuts, plate glass, and brass chain, 11 x 14 x 11in. Private collection, Chicago

- 3.17 H.C. Westermann, *The Rope Tree*, 1964, laminated plywood. Private collection.
- 3.18 H.C. Westermann, *A Positive Thought*, 1962, Douglas fir, iron pipe, and metal bolts, 30 x 12.5 x 12in. Private collection, New York
- 3.19 H.C. Westermann, *Untitled (question mark)*, 1962, plywood and enamel, 40 x 23 x 23in. Private collection, Chicago
- 3.20 William T. Wiley, *Enigma Shield*, date unknown, plywood, contact paper. Collection of the artist
- 3.21 H.C. Westermann, *Death Ship of No Port*, 1957, pine, canvas, bronze, wire, and paint, 24.25 x 30.5 x 4in. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
- 3.22 H.C. Westermann, *Untitled*, 1965, fir plywood, ash, plate glass, ebony, photograph, paper decoupage, silk flowers, rubber bumpers, and ink, 28 x 20 x 10in. Private collection, New York
- 3.23 H.C. Westermann, *Dismasted Ship*, 1956, walnut and bronze, 8 x 22 x 4in. Private collection, Illinois
- 3.24 H.C. Westermann, *U.S.S. Franklin Arising from an Oil Slick Sea*, 1976, pine, enamel, ebony, grandilo and brass, 10.5 x 33 x 7.25in. Present whereabouts unknown
- 3.25 H.C. Westermann, *Death Ship Runover by a '66 Lincoln Continental*, 1966, pine, plate glass, ebony, U.S. dollars, putty, brass, and ink. Private collection, Los Angeles
- 3.26 H.C. Westermann, *The Dead Young Sailor—1945*, ink and watercolour on paper, 8 x 9in. With letter to Thomas N. Armstrong, III, dated May 3rd, 1978, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 3.27 H.C. Westermann, *A Piece from the Museum of Shattered Dreams*, 1965, cedar, pine, ebony, rope and twine, 29.5 x 25 x 15.5in. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- 3.28 H.C. Westermann, *Antimobile*, 1965, Douglas-fir marine plywood, metal, and bicycle pedal, 68 x 35.5 x 27.5in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 3.29 H.C. Westermann, *About a Black Magic Marker*, 1959-60, imitation wood grain, with miscellaneous objects, 72 x 42in. Private collection, New York

## Chapter four

### Haunting/Homage: Bruce Nauman and the Case of Westermann's Ear

- 4.1 Peter Blake, album cover, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band*, 1967
- 4.2 H.C. Westermann with *The Big Change*, 1963, photograph taken by Lester Beall, Snr.
- 4.3 Studio shot taken on the set of Peter Blake's staging of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* (Detail), 1967
- 4.4 Robert Arneson, H.C. Westermann from *Five Famous Guys Series*, 1983, woodblock print, 30 x 22in. Estate of Robert Arneson
- 4.5 Robert Arneson, *Head Stand on a Cliff*, 1985, wood and concrete, 111 x 21in. Estate of Robert Arneson
- 4.6 Bruce Nauman, *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists*, 1966, fibreglass, 7ft x 3 x 16in. The Saatchi Collection

- 4.7 Bruce Nauman, *Untitled (After Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists)*, 1967, ink on paper, 19 x 24in. Oeffentliche Kuntsammlung, Basel
- 4.8 Man Ray, *The Riddle, or The Enigma of Isadore Ducasse*, 1920, replica 1970, sewing machine, wood, fabric, card, 38 x 55 x 24cm. Private collection
- 4.9 Bruce Nauman, *Large Knot Becoming an Ear (Knot Hearing Well)*, 1967, pencil on paper, 35 x 28in. Oeffentliche Kuntsammlung, Basel
- 4.10 H.C. Westermann, *The Big Change*, 1963, laminated plywood, 56 x 12 x 12in. Private collection, New York
- 4.11 Bruce Nauman, *Westermann's Ear*, 1967, plaster and rope, 8ft 6in x 6in. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, West Germany
- 4.12 Bruce Nauman, *Square Knot (H.C. Westermann)*, 1967, charcoal on paper, 27 x 27in. Private collection, Geneva
- 4.13 Bruce Nauman, *Untitled (Square Knot)*, 1967, charcoal and watercolour on paper, 27.5 x 30in. Private collection, New York
- 4.14 Bruce Nauman, *Untitled*, 1967, rope and wax over plaster, 17 x 26 x 4.5in. Private collection, Zurich
- 4.15 Constantin Brancusi, *Symbol of James Joyce*, 1957, ink on paper, 35 x 28cm. Pompidou Centre, Paris
- 4.16 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, photographed April 1970, 1500ft long and 15ft wide. Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah
- 4.17 Lucas Samaras, *Box No. 15 (the L Box) (Detail)*, 1964, mixed mediums, 17 x 25 x 11.25in. The Aldrich Museum of American Art
- 4.18 H.C. Westermann, *Imitation Knotty Pine*, 1966, pine, knotty pine, and brass, 12.5 x 21 x 13in. Private collection, Honolulu
- 4.19 Bruce Nauman, *Knot an Ear*, 1967, wax and rope, 2 x 6 x 4in. Private collection
- 4.20 Bruce Nauman, *From Hand to Mouth*, 1967, wax over cloth, 30 x 10 x 4in. Private collection, New York
- 4.21 Bruce Nauman, *Letter to Bill Allan: Three Well-Known Knots (Square Knot, bowline, and Clove Hitch)*, 1967, photographs mounted on paper. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 4.22 Bruce Nauman, *Bound to Fail*, 1967, photograph. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York
- 4.23 Bruce Nauman, study for *Henry Moore Trap*, 1966-67, crayon and acrylic on paper, 42 x 33in. Present location unknown
- 4.24 Bruce Nauman, *Seated Storage Capsule (for H.M.)*, 1966, pastel and acrylic on paper, 42 x 36in. Collection Elizabeth and Michael Rea, New York
- 4.25 Bruce Nauman, *Seated Storage Capsule for H.M. Made of Metallic Plastic*, 1966, pencil and crayon on paper, 40 x 35in, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, Switzerland
- 4.26 Bruce Nauman, *Light Trap for Henry Moore, No.1*, 1967, black and white photograph, 67 x 40in., present location unknown, and *Light Trap for Henry Moore, No.2*, 1967, black and white photograph, 67 x 40in. Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, Switzerland
- 4.27 Henry Moore. *Crowd Looking at a Tied-Up Object*, 1942, 432 x 559cm
- 4.28 Bruce Nauman, *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, 1967 (cast 1970), 25.5 x 24 x 2.5in, from an edition of nine, cast iron

- 4.29 Bruce Nauman, *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*, 1966-68, concrete, 17.5 x 15 x 15in. Private collection
- 4.30 Rachel Whiteread, *Table and Chair (Clear)*, 1994, rubber, 686 x 1016 x 749cm. Private collection
- 4.31 Rachel Whiteread, *Ear*, 1986, wax, location unknown
- 4.32 Installation shot, Bruce Nauman show at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, 1968
- 4.33 Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Shovel)*, 1986-87, plaster, location unknown
- 4.34 Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915, original lost; 1945 version, readymade, wood and galvanised-iron snow shovel, Yale University Art Gallery
- 4.35 H.C. Westermann, *30 Dust Pans*, plywood, oak, various woods, galvanised sheet metal, and brass, 46 x 45 x 33in. Various collections, United States
- 4.36 H.C. Westermann, *Hard of Hearing Object*, 1961, wood, aluminium alkyd enamel, galvanised sheet metal, metal screen, and steel bolt with nut, 24.5 x 12.25 x 13in. Allan Frumkin, Inc.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Encrypted Object: The Secret World of Sixties Sculpture

In an interview describing sculptural practice in the sixties, Mel Bochner pointed to the undoubted effect of Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and Carl Andre on Eva Hesse's work at the time, at the same time highlighting the less tangible echoes of other artists also identifiable in her work, artists 'who aren't discussed much anymore'.<sup>1</sup> Citing both Lucas Samaras and Lee Bontecou, alongside other artists such as Paul Thek and Öyvind Fahlström, Bochner was pointing to Hesse's engagement with the current art scene as well as connecting her to a strand of sculptural practice that has since been lost from accounts of that moment. Rather than simply being an artist of her time, Bochner said of Hesse's work

It may go even further than that. I always felt there was something 'haunted' about her work. Maybe it's haunted by all those lost 'contexts' of the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

It is to these haunting 'lost contexts' that this thesis returns. Recent scholarship has situated Hesse's work within a more nuanced context than either Minimalism or Post-minimalism allow for, and has done much to pave the way for my own study in which questions of subjectivity and the spectatorial encounter are crucial. However, it is those artists so often cited parenthetically, or footnoted, in the literature from the time, and often, in those texts on Hesse, that the following study focuses. Conventionally, such connections have been understood in terms of 'influence' but I want to retain Bochner's term 'haunting' in order to complicate this somewhat. Lucas Samaras, Lee Bontecou and H.C. Westermann are three artists who, although stemming from very different milieus, are each pertinent examples of those 'lost' artists haunting the period. It is the various ways in which their work is clearly a part of their moment, yet also seeks to disrupt it, that the following four chapters explore.

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<sup>1</sup> Mel Bochner, as quoted in 'About Eva Hesse: Mel Bochner Interviewed by Joan Simon', in Mignon Nixon, ed., *Eva Hesse*, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

It was my earlier work on Eva Hesse that initially drew me to these other artists that 'haunt' her work and, more widely, that moment of sculptural production of the early to mid sixties that took as its prevailing aesthetic the structural, geometric, and pared-down object. Hesse is referred to at several points in the following chapters, as her own engagement with both a Minimal and Post-minimal aesthetic articulates exactly the uneasy fault-lines that concern me. This thesis remains focused on predominantly East coast-based practice, particularly the way in which it engaged with, refused, or complicated dominant models of sculptural practice at the time, but I shall also consider some West coast practices in relation to these issues, specifically the work of Bruce Nauman.

Both Samaras and Bontecou worked exclusively in New York during the period under examination in this thesis. Samaras was a Greek immigrant living in New York with his family, where he started (and never finished) a MFA at Rutgers University, New Jersey, after which he moved to the city where he continues to work, extremely privately, today. Samaras's work has typically been squashed awkwardly into a lineage of Assemblage, Surrealism, Neo-Dada and Pop, with an obligatory nod toward his Greek origins that provides an overtly neat narrative of Byzantine relic boxes and the *memento mori*.<sup>3</sup> Working in both two and three-dimensions, he is best known for his elaborately decorated and crammed boxes. His use of knives, steel pins and shards of fragmented mirror in the covering and filling of these works has led to speculations on the hazardous, violent and masochistic tendency of his boxes, an overemphasis which seem to have ruled out the possibility of touch that the tactile, sensuous materiality of the surfaces invites. Notions of the outmoded, the kitsch and the camp all reverberate through his sculptural objects in ways that seem to mask rather than account for, envelop

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<sup>3</sup> See Ben Lifson, *Samaras: The Photographs of Lucas Samaras*, New York, 1987, for a partial and exclusive account of Samara's photography that focuses only on the nature of autobiography, and representations of his 'self,' or Martin Friedman, 'The Obsessive Images of Lucas Samaras's', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 8, November 1966, which analyses the work of Samaras in terms of a fascination with death, ceremony and ritual that Friedman considers in terms of an obsessive interest in Byzantine culture. Germano Celant, in the introduction to *Lucas Samaras: Boxes and Mirrored Cell*, New York: Pace Gallery, 1988, also reverts to a language of 'mysticism,' the 'transformation' of the banal to the reliquary, in terms of a 'transfiguration' at play, all of which clearly derive from a desire to read Samaras's work in terms of its 'otherness,' or to treat Samaras as 'foreign,' and 'exotic'.

rather than reveal, the strategies of displacement and concealment these boxes ultimately embody.

Bontecou graduated from the Art Student's League, New York City in 1956, and lived in the city until the early seventies, when she moved to Pennsylvania where she continues to work in isolation today. Bontecou was extremely successful during the early to mid sixties. Showing with the Leo Castelli Gallery alongside Donald Judd and Frank Stella, she received several public commissions for her large scale, wall-mounted reliefs. Working from welded steel armatures, Bontecou developed a unique practice of stretching dirty, worn skeins of fabric over the metal structure, always with a gaping hole backed with black felt, a disturbing void ~~(was)~~ around which the surface is organised and the spectatorial encounter disturbed.

H.C. Westermann, on the other hand, grew up in Los Angeles, and returned to the West coast in 1964, where he taught and worked in San Francisco for one year. Already established as an artist by the early sixties, Westermann was older than both Samaras and Bontecou, and had already served as a Marine in two wars before beginning his art training at the Art Institute of Chicago 1952 on the popular GI Bill, where he had already undertaken a course in advertising prior to enlisting for the Korean war.<sup>4</sup> Westermann eventually settled in Connecticut with his wife, where they worked well away from the art worlds of both New York and California, in the house and studio Westermann spent the last ten years of his life constructing.

Despite his popularity outside of New York, Westermann was never able to shake off his label of 'outsider' or 'provincial' artist, and he has been claimed respectively by both Chicago and California as their own. His carefully carpentered, brightly painted figurative objects, wooden tableaux-filled vitrines, and oddly disturbing series of wooden houses, received a rather more mixed

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<sup>4</sup> The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or the 'GI Bill' as it was known was introduced after the Second World War. It was given to returning veterans to adjust on their return from military service, providing stipends and subsistence funds to enable them to buy homes and businesses, receive training, and especially education. The GI Bill provided tuition fees, living expenses, equipment and books for those returning to college. Artists Leon Golub and Claes Oldenburg also benefited from the GI Bill and went to art college in Chicago after the war.



reception in New York, where they were viewed as too garish, anachronistic and at odds with contemporary sculptural practice. Westermann carved a series of 'death ships' which he repeated throughout his career in various woods, which he would encase in beautifully carpentered boxes, welded in metal and coated in tar, or dipped in oil paints.

Bruce Nauman is another artist whose work has proved consistently difficult to place. His working practice spans a wide range, from performance to video, sculpture and sound pieces, although it is a small group of works referencing Westermann and, interestingly, Henry Moore, completed the year he graduated from his MFA in California, that I shall look at. Often classed as an 'anti', or more often, 'Post-minimal' artist, with his insistence on the body and use of radical, unusual materials, Nauman looked to the work of fellow Californian artists as well as the work of Westermann, to whom William T. Wiley had introduced Nauman whilst the latter was still a student. Nauman's 'Westermann' series of works includes a plaster ear, tied up in rope, a rubber cast of a crossed pair of arms, looped again through a knot, as well as a number of sketches and another, smaller plaster ear. In this chapter, I suggest that this small, lesser-known group of post-college works by Nauman, bear a striking resemblance to the late college work of British contemporary sculptor Rachel Whiteread, who also produced a small cast of an ear. Thinking about the prominence of the ear in these works, I begin to ask questions about ways in which ideas and working strategies are 'silenced' or 'heard', how they might be passed down to, or be inherited by, other artists.

As I began to revisit the earliest texts and exhibition catalogues on post-war American sculptural practice in the initial stages of researching Samaras, Bontecou, Westermann, and Nauman, it became clear that the sixties by no means belonged exclusively to Minimalism and Post-minimalism or Pop, and, although this is an area that has been addressed, and to an extent recuperated in more recent writing, there remains something disconcerting in the seemingly wholesale repression of entire strands (or, rather, loose ends) of sculptural practice that were

so prevalent at the time.<sup>5</sup> My point is not merely to reclaim a place for these artists within art history, or insert them back into an existing narrative, but to explore the strategies of resistance that Samaras, Bontecou and Westermann employ in their work, a resistance, or 'encryption', as I will argue, that their work both invokes and embodies. In the final chapter I focus on the work of Bruce Nauman in relation to a series of 'homages' he made to Westermann and Henry Moore. The idea of homage has, surprisingly perhaps, proved incredibly fruitful in thinking about how trajectories of 'influence' might be complicated through a notion of haunting. This allows a more fluid, less cohesive system of connection and inheritance that might account for certain discrepancies and ruptures in sculptural practice during this period, which I understand here as a series of generational 'cuts' that sever the traditional patriarchal, Oedipal, even, lineage of tradition and inheritance that 'homage' might suggest. Each of the artists focused on in the following chapters were either involved in creating homages to other artists, whether wittingly or not, or else they were the subject of another's homage, setting in play complex relationships of acknowledgment, acceptance and inheritance between artists.

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Returning to early surveys on sculpture from the 1960s onward we see the roots of my investigation already set in place. The situation of sculpture was far from fixed at the time, as the array of books and articles published (and the bewildering assortment of chapter headings and thematic groupings within them) demonstrate.

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<sup>5</sup> In Alex Potts *The Sculptural Imagination*, New Haven and London, 2000, Potts goes some way to redressing the balance with his fine discussion of the work of Bontecou, which I address in detail later on. Richard J. Williams's recent book, *After Modern Sculpture, Art in the United States and Europe 1965-70*, Manchester University Press, 2000, published the same year as Potts' work, also focuses on more marginalised artists and exhibitions. For example, in chapter three he discusses Lucy Lippard's 'Eccentric Abstraction' show in some detail. Williams's project begins in 1965, therefore only spanning part of the period my own less inclusive study focuses on. In his book Williams spends as much time on contemporary texts on sculpture as he does the objects, claiming that in his book 'they are not treated as supplements to the sculpture. In many ways they are the sculpture'. (p. 3.) Although comprehensive and ambitious in scope, Williams's emphasis on the writings published in the art press, as well as his treatment of psychoanalytic texts such as Ehrenzweig's *The Hidden Order of Art* and several of Freud's writings differs from my own. My claim is that it is not in the articles, reviews and exhibition catalogues from the time that the objects are somehow discovered (or even 'made', as Williams seems to be claiming), but the opposite; it is the ways in which these objects exceed, refuse, and dissolve, even, in the face of those accounts that renders the work under discussion in the following chapters so compelling.

Looking at Donald Judd's *Specific Objects* survey article in 1965, Jack Burnham's *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century*, which addressed the since-lost strand of work involved with technology and kineticism (1968),<sup>6</sup> Udo Kultermann's *The New Sculpture: Environments and Assemblage* (1968), Albert E. Elsen's *Origins of Modern Sculpture: pioneers and premises* (1974), and Maurice Tuchman's *American Sculpture of the Sixties* catalogue from 1967, it is clear that the parameters of contemporary sculptural practice were then incredibly elastic. Samaras, Bontecou and Westermann appeared in most of these books, often with Samaras and Westermann bracketed together as contemporary box makers, or 'surrealists', alongside other forgotten or, at least, neglected artists such as John Chamberlain and Paul Thek.

One need only turn to Gregory Battcock's *Minimal art: a critical anthology*, first published in 1968, to see certain since 'lost' artists sitting alongside the established Minimal artists within the text and images, in order to see this at work. A brief glance down the list of illustrations in this anthology emphasises this point. From Richard Artschwager, Claes Oldenburg, Lee Bontecou, Keith Sonnier, Paul Thek; the strictures governing what might constitute a 'Minimal' work of art may today strike one as remarkably loose. In her 1995 introduction to Battcock's anthology, Anne Wagner points to the wide range of artists that, at the time, fell under the remit of the 'Minimal', citing Samaras, Bontecou, Yayoi Kusama, Lindsey Decker and Claes Oldenburg as examples of those anomalous artists that have 'consistently been left out of account' since the sixties.<sup>7</sup>

The more the period is explored, the less tenable the term 'Minimalism' seems, both as a definition of the works of Morris, Judd and LeWitt, and as a term to describe a prevailing model of practice in New York during the sixties. James Meyer's recent book *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (2001) has gone a long way to expanding the remit of the Minimal by including (though in

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<sup>6</sup> The recent show at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2000, sought to reclaim the status of kinetic art made during the sixties. See Guy Brett, ed., *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*, London, 2000

<sup>7</sup> Anne M. Wagner, 'Reading Minimal Art', in Battcock, Gregory, ed., *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, p. 13.

parentheses, or in his footnotes) many artists since 'lost'.<sup>8</sup> Meyer also points out the discrepancies between the so-called 'minimal' at the time, and its subsequent historicisation, tracking an intimate genealogy of the word as it appeared in the art press prior to the Minimal explosion. However, by retaining the names 'Andre', 'Flavin', 'LeWitt', 'Judd' and 'Morris' as his principal characters, the stage is still set for a project that seeks to retain the Minimal as the dominant model of sixties sculpture. Meyer's important work, the largest and most serious to date to concentrate solely on Minimalism, provides an invaluable contextualisation of both the historical period and the main texts and shows of the time.

A book that has proved crucial to my own study is Alex Potts's *The Sculptural Imagination* (2000). This book charts a distinct kind of sculptural imagination that has developed since the end of the eighteenth century, in which the display and positioning of objects, and the viewing encounters they engender, were placed under a wholly new set of pressures. Potts's work has been pivotal to the following study, which shares his investigation into the implications for subjectivity generated by the sculptural encounter.<sup>9</sup> Potts develops a model of spectatorial encounter with the three-dimensional object that spans the neoclassicism of Canova, through the welded works of Anthony Caro and David Smith, to the serial structures of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, continuing up to recent installation works by Louise Bourgeois. He explores the different kinds of encounter in which the viewer has been embroiled in modern and post modern practices, claiming that the anxiety certain works arouse in the spectator finds its analogue in the shifting conditions of display, mobility and placement of both viewer and object.

Potts addresses the implications of these different encounters in terms of the potential fragmentation and fraught experience of the modern subject facing the works. It is this key engagement of the spectator, locked into a relationship with the object, that concerns me in the present study, where the fractured encounter

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<sup>8</sup> See my review of Meyer's book in which I discuss the above points in more detail, *OBJECT*, no. 5, London, 2003, pp. 86-88.

<sup>9</sup> Praising the ambitious nature of Potts's project in his review of *The Sculptural Imagination*, Thomas Crow succinctly describes how Potts's study raises the stakes of sculptural theory in the way in which it represents 'nothing less than the obligation of serious art to account for subjectivity', 'Sculptural Enlightenment', *The Sculpture Journal*, VIII, 2002, pp. 89-90, p. 90.

between subject and object is also addressed. Potts argues that the shifting physical conditions of sculpture, from small to large-scale, brings with it an accompanying shift from private to public modes of looking and consumption. Since the sixties, the dematerialising drive of the object has been 'poised on a fault line'<sup>10</sup> between installation-type art, and object-based sculpture, that makes clear the instability of the viewing encounter with the work. I take this position of the destabilised encounter of the viewing subject as the starting point for the following investigation, where modes of viewing the object are understood as subjected to similar pressures and complications.

In this thesis, I want to shift the focus, to tip the scale in favour of the marginalised, silenced voices of the sixties. My point is not to simply switch the cast of characters, claiming a centrality for Samaras *not* Judd, Bontecou *not* Morris; that would simply be misleading. What is possible, retrospectively, however, is a cracking open of those terms of engagement, a widening of the boundaries that allows both for an encounter with those primary, crucial texts on sculpture of the period, and a renegotiation of the objects with which they deal. Throughout the following chapters I have used the same texts that have typically been understood as 'about' the Minimal work of art, to tell an alternative story of sculptural practice, already embedded there, but always obscured.

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My interest in Samaras, Bontecou and Westermann arose from my initial research on Minimalism. In particular I had spent time re-reading Donald Judd's famous essay 'Specific Objects' from 1965, an essay which is normally understood as a polemic in support of the Minimal object. Instead, 'Specific Objects' revealed itself to be about a bewilderingly diverse list of artists, spanning generations of both the East and West coasts of American sculptural practice which Judd claimed were either precursors to, or contemporary makers of the new specific object. Alongside Ronald Bladen, Anne Truitt, John Chamberlain, Richard Artschwager, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Watts, and Tony Smith,

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<sup>10</sup> Potts, op.cit., p. 22.

West Coast artists Kenneth Price, Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz are also classed as 'specific object' artists, as are Lucas Samaras, Lee Bontecou and H.C. Westermann.<sup>11</sup>

Judd's argument in 'Specific Objects' opens with the now infamous statement that 'Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture'.<sup>12</sup> Neither had it been entirely consistent in its formal achievements, or shared conceptions of what a sculpture should be, as Judd makes clear when he points to the diversity of practices drawn upon in his essay. In a way, Judd is casting a wide net in this article in order to accommodate, not account for the diversity of sculptural practices emerging at the time, a kind of overview of the current scene in which his aim was to rebut prior models, rather than to homogenise the new objects.

Rather, it is his antagonism toward established, European models of practice with their emphasis on illusion and pictorial imagery, that is being dismantled in the new work, where single discrete units are instead 'open and extended, more or less environmental'.<sup>13</sup> It is this shift of spatial relations which Judd suggests differentiates the new object from previous models. In earlier sculptures, 'beams thrust' outward, as though paint strokes, presenting a 'naturalistic and anthropomorphic image' to which '[t]he space corresponds'.<sup>14</sup> I would argue that it is exactly the new 'open' and 'environmental' occupation of space which Judd praises as exemplary of the new sculpture, that leads to a mode of encountering the works under discussion here, in which these objects encroach upon, rather than merely 'correspond' with space. Space, in these works, now folds in on itself, closes up and refuses access, or envelops or suffocates the viewer.

Any aspect of 'anthropomorphism' which might be provoked by these objects stems more from the way in which the viewing body is activated by or through the object, than anything inherent or contained in the object as it becomes both my

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<sup>11</sup> Judd, Donald, 'Specific Objects', *Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 7, April 1965, pp. 181-189, reprinted in *Donald Judd: The Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax and New York, 1975, p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

aggressor and analogue. A key buzz word of the time, 'anthropomorphism' came to stand for a variety of different things, whether as descriptive term or negative criticism, bound up with issues of figuration and bodily identification, and also issues of scale and size, of sculpture persisting as a kind of bodily counterpart for the spectator. In the following chapters the body remains a pivotal point of reference, specifically the body of the spectator and its relation to the object he or she is faced with. The aggressivity of the objects under examination is not the same in each case, and the encounter with a work by Bontecou is very different to that of the spectator facing a Westermann object. Rather, what each of these artists share is a desire to wrong-foot the viewer, which can be humorous, aggressive, awkward or threatening, but which in each instance demands a radical renegotiation of one's subject position in relation to that work.

Although elision or loss of subjectivity might be the implied, or actual, threat of these objects, this loss is never wholly successful. What renders each of these artists' works so exceptional is the way in which none of them relinquishes the object itself in their attack on the status of the object. However fraught that encounter might be, the sheer materiality of the object under discussion is never lost; rather, it is that fraught point of intersection between the object and subject which maintains the encounter.

Although 'Specific Objects' provides a compelling survey of new three-dimensional work, the argument Judd proposes fails to find resolution in the face of the actual objects selected to illustrate the essay. It may be that Judd was simply trying to accommodate the new and expanding range of artists working in three dimensions at the time, providing a kind of critical overview of the contemporary art scene. However, the situation is, I feel, more critical than that. A major problem lies in Judd's positioning of the 'specific object' negatively, defined only in terms of what it is not. Whilst his emphasis on the diversity of the artists he discusses does serve to temper any larger claims he might be trying to impose on the works as a unit, the logic of the specific object starts to unravel as the individual objects are addressed in all their specificity. Although I return to this point in more detail in chapter two in relation to Judd's article on Lee Bontecou, written the same year as 'Specific Objects', it is important to note that

Judd was not attempting cogently to theorise the works selected. Rather, what is seen in 'Specific Objects' is a dilemma between Judd's idea of 'specific object' and the actual specificity of the objects by Samaras, Bontecou and Westermann which I shall explore in the following chapters.

One year after the publication of Judd's 'Specific Objects' and his article on Bontecou, another critic also sought to address the contemporary sculptural scene in an equally interesting, and in some ways, more overt way. Lucy Lippard's essay 'Eccentric Abstraction', was published in *Art International* in November 1966, to accompany the show of the same name that Lippard curated at the Fischbach Gallery, New York. The remit of 'Eccentric Abstraction' was to counter the prevalent Minimal, or 'structural idiom'<sup>15</sup> currently dominating the New York art scene, with less hard-edged sculptures that 'refused to eschew imagination and the extension of sensuous experience'<sup>16</sup> whilst at the same time refusing to 'sacrifice the solid formal basis'<sup>17</sup> of Minimalism.

Both Judd and Lippard make large claims which seek to disrupt contemporary modes of sculptural practice, Judd with the 'specific object' and Lippard with the erotic, surreal humour of the so-called 'eccentric abstractionists' in response to the Minimal model. Although apparently writing from opposite ends of the critical spectrum, what is crucial to my project is the fact that in validating their respective positions, both Judd and Lippard draw upon the same pool of artists. Bontecou, Samaras and Westermann are each afforded individual attention in Lippard's article, where they are cited as 'precursors'<sup>18</sup> to the current scene of abstract sculptors such as Frank Lincoln Viner and Don Potts. Eccentric Abstraction was also Bruce Nauman's first New York group show, in which his rubber strip pieces were exhibited. Lippard compares the way Bontecou 'subjugated the evocative element to unexpected formal ends'<sup>19</sup> in her 'gaping' wall reliefs, to Westermann's own 'fusion of the sensuous element with deadpan

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<sup>15</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Eccentric Abstraction', *Art International*, vol. 10, no. 9, November 1966, pp. 28-40, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 28 and 34.



abstract form'.<sup>20</sup> Samaras's 'sadistic pin and needle objects and yarn-patterned boxes'<sup>21</sup> also manage to combine the opposing registers of the 'physically attractive and evocatively disturbing'.<sup>22</sup> Nauman's cut rubber and cast fibreglass strips, hung sparsely from the wall, with their rough surfaces and drooping lilt are described by Lippard as 'carelessly surfaced, somewhat aged, blurred and repellent, wholly non-sculptural and deceptively inconsequential at first sight'.<sup>23</sup> Limply suspended from the middle of the wall, Lippard refers to the strips as having a 'left-over function', an early working through of Nauman's later concern with casting negative space, so that a solid block of resin might register as the space underneath a chair, or a cast oval hole might stand as marker of the absented body. Lippard was drawn to the absurd suggestion of a 'non-sculptural' sculpture that is almost 'not there' which Nauman's work seems to offer.

Bontecou, Samaras and Westermann seem to straddle a divide. This was not an historical or practical divide, between the 'new' and the 'old', or between marginal practice and mainstream acceptance, but a theoretical one, in which the stakes are raised for conflicting theorisations of sculpture somehow at odds with their idiosyncratic formal appearances. As well as highlighting the hard-won battles occurring at this time between different theoretical positions, the fact that each of these artists was employed by opposing writers to confirm their own positions demonstrates the unstable, conflicting status of both the objects and the theories.

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I want now to present a brief schematic outline of my project. Firstly, I will sketch the ideas around resistance, secrecy and haunting that recur throughout, describing the various theoretical discourses I have drawn upon in this study in order to examine the 'secret', encrypted world of these artists' work. I shall then present a summary of each chapter, highlighting the central concerns and issues raised. The first three chapters take as their focus the work of Samaras, Bontecou

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

and Westermann. The fourth and final chapter addresses the work of Bruce Nauman in relation to the series of sculptural homages to Westermann he made immediately after graduating from art school during the mid-sixties. This final chapter serves as the concluding section of my thesis, where I address more fully some of the theoretical issues raised throughout this project.

Explicitly addressed in chapters one and two, and implicit throughout, is a fundamental engagement with the subject's psychic encounter with sculpture. As discussed above, my interest is in the kinds of fraught encounter with sculpture in which the viewer becomes embroiled. I am interested in ideas of how objects might 'mean', specifically those objects that seem so deliberately difficult for the spectator confronted with them. This difficulty is not only the preserve of abstract sculpture, for the apparent narrative, or 'symbolic' make-up of both Samaras and, more overtly, H.C. Westermann seemed to suggest something more like a *strategy* of secrecy and intractability, what I have theorised throughout in terms of different schemas of encryption. These artists sought deliberately to engulf the object, in ways that only served to heighten the desire to know that hidden 'kernel' or centre.

Structured, then, around systems of secrecy and secretion, privacy and privation, the objects under discussion in the following chapters seek, in their own idiosyncratic ways, to engage that strategy of resistance and secrecy. Although claims for the unfixability and slippage of meanings have become clichés within contemporary art historical discourse, it is not simply, or not only, that aspect of the work upon which I want to focus in the following chapters. Rather, it is the underlying processes and stratagems by which the artist achieves this 'unfixability' through the specificities of their fixed, material processes of making.

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Chapter one focuses on a series of boxes Samaras first began to work with in 1960; small found boxes picked up in junk shops and painted mute shades of grey, black and white, and stuffed with plaster-soaked sheets of crêpe-paper that

hardened into impenetrable shells. These boxes were made prior to Samaras's trademark works in which he continued to use reclaimed boxes as well as work with pre-fabricated ones. He covered these boxes in thousands of glass beads and semi-precious jewels. He would envelop others in arabesques of coloured yarn, or pierce them with pins so that they shone and bristled, or he would stick single, sharp carving knives into their centres, so that they protrude from beneath the semi-open lids. Crammed with stuffed birds, cutlery, self-portraits, syringes and beads, the motifs and objects contained in or covering these boxes are repeated in the series of dinner plates Samaras constructed. In these, drinking glasses were glued to a tray and filled with yarn and or plates covered with mocked-up rotting meals.

Many writers emphasise the psychic dimension of Samaras's work, highlighting the fetishistic and sadistic charge of their surfaces and contents, as nightmarish embodiments of repressed psychic trauma.<sup>24</sup> This work has been written about in terms of orality, fetishism and narcissism, readings that stem from an iconographical analysis of the objects. Contrary to these claims, I argue that the 'psychoanalytic motifs', taken alone, are inadequate to the effects of scattering, cramming, stuffing and spilling that make up the psychoanalytic logic of Samaras's work. Instead, what is foregrounded is the way in which his boxes refuse such iconographical 'subject matter'. It is, rather the resistance Samaras imposes upon his works' 'subject matter' that activates their psychic dimension. Rather than a process of revelation, I argue that Samaras seeks to stave meaning off, not invite it in, as though performing a kind of 'cut' on iconographical

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<sup>24</sup> Writers have drawn attention to the psychic dimension of orality in relation to the dinner plate works, particularly Kim Levin, who has written the only full-length study on the artist to date, in 1975. See Kim Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, New York, 1975. Levin's book touches on the disturbing, psychically charged encounters that Samaras's boxes dramatise, for example the sharp knives and pins, and the inclusion of self-portraits and mirrors in his pieces. However, she does not establish any theoretical framework through which to situate or begin to map Samaras's work, other than invoking the implied threat of violence they contain. Donald Kuspit has written on the fetishistic element of Samaras's boxes, connecting them to his Byzantine past in a fairly pedestrian account focusing on his pastel works that does little to expand the theoretical parameters through which to think about his sculpture. See Donald B Kuspit, 'Lucas Samaras's Death Instinct', *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s*, New York, 1988. See also Diane Waldman, 'Samaras: Reliquaries for St. Sade', *Art News*, vol 65, October 1966, pp. 44-46 and pp. 72-75, and Charlotte Willard, 'Violence and Art', *Art in America*, no. 57, January, 1969, for examples of such approaches. Samaras's own writings also draw upon psychoanalytic tropes of maternal fear, violence, sexual phantasy and the object-as-fetish. See for example Lucas Samaras, *Samaras Album*, New York, 1971, and Lucas Samaras, *Crude Delights*, Pace Gallery, New York, 1980.

readings. I argue this point in relation to the early series of plaster boxes, as I demonstrate that the structure of secrecy and concealment of his later boxes was always the structural motor behind his boxes, even before he began to fill and cover them with jewels, pins and yarn.

Samaras's boxes tell us only that a secret is impacted within the structural form of the box, not what that secret is. My concern is not to identify the specificities of what that secret content or meaning might be, but to understand the various means through which the artist seeks to conceal it, a strategy described by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok as 'cryptonymy', which I shall return to in some detail later on. To make the obvious point, once a secret is known, it is no longer a secret. Literary critic Esther Rashkin, whose own work on Abraham and Torok has proved helpful to the present study writes, '[w]hat is obstructed or barred in cryptonymy is not 'meaning' in any traditional sense of the term, but a connection, situation, or drama that resists meaning ~~(or intelligibility)~~'.<sup>25</sup> It is this resistant kernel of secrecy, a kind of promise that is always thwarted, that structures the way in which Samaras's boxes are both constructed and encountered.

Lee Bontecou's large-scale, wall mounted constructions are the focus of chapter two.<sup>26</sup> In this chapter a shift occurs from the small, intimate scale of Lucas Samaras's boxes, to Bontecou's large, imposing reliefs, although they share with Samaras's work the positing of something absent or secret concealed at the centre of the object. Bontecou's works allow for a more elastic mode of looking—from far away, where the objects look like flat, two-dimensional paintings, to close-up—where they fill the line of vision with the black crater and dirty, stained fabric sheath stretched over it. The threatening nature of the pins, knives, closed lids and caked, glistening surfaces of Samaras's boxes is exaggerated in Bontecou's reliefs, where the immanent threat to the spectator is even more physically, psychically and, interestingly, more *abstractly* charged.

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<sup>25</sup> Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative*, Princeton, 1992, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Many thanks to Briony Fer and Tamar Garb for inviting me to present a paper on Bontecou in their session 'Disappearance' at the 2003 AAH conference ARTiculations. Thanks also to the audience and panel whose questions and comments have helped me formulate my argument in relation to Bontecou's work.

If Samaras's impenetrable works describe a structure of secrecy and potential damage if violated, Bontecou's work seems almost to enact that promised attack. No longer a covert operation of peering such as, I argue, Samaras's boxes require, the mode of looking in these works is more libidinally charged. A devouring, ravishing gaze is both demanded and emitted from the work. The damage threatened is real, and is not only aimed at my hand, or eye, but my entire body. The secret, absent centre threatens to incorporate me within its centre; a destructive encounter in which both the subject and object is put under pressure, threatening the dissolution of both. The 'open and extended' or 'environmental' aspect of the objects praised by Judd finds its most vivid dramatisation in the work of Bontecou, whose 'grim, abyssal' objects Judd described in such compelling detail in his article on her.<sup>27</sup> In Bontecou's work, the space outside of the object is no longer merely activated, but is viscerally encroached upon and devoured.

In many ways, the work of both Samaras and Bontecou dramatises the situation of sculpture during the sixties. By the last few years of the decade, the 'dematerialisation' of the object was a well-established trope, almost a cliché which during the earlier years of the decade was already under investigation in the work of those so-called 'assemblage' artists, discussed in chapter two.<sup>28</sup> Samaras's and Bontecou's careful, hands-on crafting of their objects distanced their practices from both the manufactured character of the Minimal object and the conceptual projects of, for example, Bochner and LeWitt. This created a high level of tension between the abundant, almost excessive materiality of the object, and the thwarting of access to it and its contents.

The objects of Westermann offer a less physically threatening encounter than those of Bontecou and Samaras, and it is these works that I focus on in chapter three. What Westermann's works share with Samaras and Bontecou, rather, is a

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<sup>27</sup> Donald Judd, 'Lee Bontecou', *Arts Magazine*, April, 1965, pp. 17-21, reprinted in *The Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax, Nova Scotia and New York, 1975, pp. 178-180.

<sup>28</sup> The term 'dematerialization' gained currency in the late sixties, specifically after Lucy Lippard and John Chandler published an article entitled 'The Dematerialization of Art' in 1968, which Lippard then expanded into her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, New York, 1973.

fundamental intractability. This is not merely to cast ‘nothing’ as the work’s meaning, but to point again to the strategies of cryptonymy and difficulty the objects embody. Unlike the voracious mode of looking Bontecou’s works engender, or the partial, fragmented ‘peering’ offered by Samaras’s boxes, Westermann’s works require a type of looking that has more in common with the physical act of ‘drifting’. I cast both the viewing experience and mode of construction Westermann’s works demand in terms of ‘bricolage’ and ‘braconnage’ (or ‘poaching’) as alternative ways of reading, juxtaposing, creating and understanding, a language appropriately ‘borrowed’ from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau respectively. I draw attention to the way in which Westermann’s so-called ‘folk’ craft style, with his carefully carved wooden Death Ships, painted houses and clunky, figurative *personnages*, are not so much outmoded anachronisms, but are instead entrenched within a language of making-do and bricolage that belies their apparently unfashionable status as craft objects, and Westermann’s labelling as provincial hobbyist.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In her unpublished PhD thesis *The ‘Do-it-yourself Artwork’: Spectator Participation and the ‘Dematerialisation’ of the Art Object, New York and Rio de Janeiro, 1958-1967*, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2003, Anna Dezeuze also draws upon the notion of bricolage. She explores the differing modes of experience and participation certain art works have demanded from the late fifties to the sixties, as she tracks the so-called ‘dematerialization’ of the art work back to a much earlier period of artistic production than the late sixties, focusing on earlier work produced between 1958 and 1967 by artists and movements such as Fluxus, the Neoconcretists in Brazil, to Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. Dezeuze’s understanding of the work of the bricoleur differs from mine in several ways. I refer only to Lévi-Strauss’s definition of bricolage, rather than a generalised notion of the bricoleur as hobbyist, or amateur handyman. Dezeuze contrasts the work of bricolage with that of Umberto Eco’s theory of the ‘open work’, suggesting that, whilst the ‘open work’ and bricolage are similar in that they each bring together various parts in order to make a new whole, bricolage is not so easy to pin down within the remit of the art work, as it extends into everyday life, and is less clearly delineated. I, however, argue that Westermann’s engagement with bricolage is a carefully orchestrated system that, unlike Dezeuze’s reading of bricolage as endlessly open, actually involves a rather more limited set of tools at the artist’s disposal, that do in fact operate within a fixed, closed system of artistic production. In my work on bricolage, I focus explicitly on the aspect of repetition and the notion of the ‘retrospective’ that Lévi-Strauss employs in his discussion of bricolage. In this chapter, and also my development of the notion of ‘autobricolage’, I also draw upon the work of Michel de Certeau, as does Dezeuze, although we each reference rather different aspects of his work on the ‘everyday’. I focus on de Certeau’s notion of ‘braconnage’ or ‘poaching’ as a counter to the systematic re-ordering that bricolage demands, involving a less systematic mode of both making and viewing that de Certeau describes in terms of ‘drifting’. Dezeuze’s concept of the ‘do-it-yourself’ artwork is a fascinating response to the kinds of audience participation and subsequent modes of viewing and handling of the work of art, and provides an important model for understanding many works of art that seemingly fall outside the remit of contemporary sculptural practice during the late fifties and early sixties, although as her thesis was only completed in 2003, I was unable to engage more directly with her ideas at the time of writing my chapter on bricolage.

Max Kozloff described Westermann's development of a visual vocabulary of stock symbols and recognisable forms as 'a sculptor who may be said to be obsessed with visual art's lack of utterance'.<sup>30</sup> This is a strategy of 'cryptonymy', by which Westermann chooses to work with a limited resource of private motifs that, far from narrating a personal or private story, in fact stand only as markers that a secret narrative is at work, without revealing 'what' that secret ultimately is.

In the case of each artist I have found illuminating a small, hand crafted or moulded box, made at the very early stages of their careers in the case of Samaras and Bontecou, and made slightly later, in the early sixties, by Westermann. What each of these boxes share is a position as somehow outside of the dominant working strategy of these artists, whether that is due to their formal difference, or instead due to their having been ignored in subsequent accounts of these artists' works. These boxes function in the following chapters as a mythic 'origin story' for each artist's career.

In chapter one, I focus on Samaras's small plaster boxes as a case study through which, I argue, light can be shed on his later, more complex boxes. Between 1959 and 1960, Bontecou made a number of small, welded, hand-size boxes, covered in black velvet and coated with thick black soot. After constructing these intimate boxes she moved off in an entirely different direction, toward her large, cavity-strewn wall structures. These early, small black boxes appear as though material embodiments of the later voids of her reliefs, in which we see Bontecou working through critical issues such as secrecy and absence, that prove crucial to understanding the later wall-hung pieces. The small wooden box by Westermann, on the other hand, fits neatly into his ongoing engagement with carpentry and his construction of hinged wooden boxes. Intriguingly titled *Secrets*, I argue, however, that this largely ignored box of Westermann's might also stand as an origin point for understanding his own strategy of secrecy and privacy in relation to his other works.

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<sup>30</sup> Max Kozloff, *H.C. Westermann*, Los Angeles, 1968, p. 6.

In the final chapter I focus on the work of Bruce Nauman, specifically his series of sculptural homages dedicated to Westermann and Henry Moore in the mid-sixties. Nauman's inheritance of certain aspects of Westermann's work receives its contemporary resonance in the work of Rachel Whiteread, a kind of 'transmission' that I describe as 'transgenerational haunting'. This aspect of artistic haunting suggests that Whiteread, through looking to the work of Nauman who, in turn, looked to the work of Westermann, has unwittingly inherited a 'family secret' that is 'Westermann', and his working practice. What this secret hints at is the idea that Whiteread is less influenced solely by Nauman and the more familiar source of Minimalism, but that her work also owes much to the wooden, figurative 'craft work' sculptures of Westermann.

The work of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok inform my work around secrecy and haunting in this thesis. Since their translation into English in 1986, Abraham and Torok's work has proved influential within literary theory, particularly in French and English departments in North America. Although Ewa Lajer-Burchardth invokes Abraham's concept of the 'phantom' toward the end of her article on Tracy Moffatt in her article 'A Stranger Within',<sup>31</sup> and Briony Fer cites their joint paper ' "The Lost Object-Me" ': Notes on Endocryptic Identification', (1975) in her article 'Objects Beyond Objecthood',<sup>32</sup> there has been no detailed engagement with their work in art history or the visual arts.

The work of Abraham and Torok has begun to receive some attention in recent years outside of France, and many of their texts have been, or are currently being translated. Abraham and Torok's work has been used to great effect by certain writers in particular, especially Esther Rashkin, Nicholas Royle and Nicholas Rand, the original editor of Abraham and Torok's works, and now co-collaborator with Torok. I hope to emphasise the importance of these two crucial theorists in relation to art historical writing, particularly their concept of secrets, cryptonymy and phantomatic haunting.

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<sup>31</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burchardth 'A Stranger Within', *Parkett*, no.53, 1998, pp. 36-45.

<sup>32</sup> Briony Fer, 'Objects Beyond Objecthood', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, pp. 25-36



Whilst other writers deploying the methodology of Abraham and Torok seek to repair, or make good the gaps in the narrative, or recover the secrets that haunt characters within those narratives, the narrative, or history that I am tracking in this thesis is necessarily of a far less closed and resolved nature. For this reason, I cannot, and do not wish to, track back and find the answers to explain irregularities and returns. I hope only to highlight that such gaps and ghosts function as constitutive of certain models of artistic practice, and might also provide a useful framework for thinking about the art historical discourses surrounding those objects.

The crucial aspect of Abraham and Torok's theoretical structure is the issue of unspeakability; the way in which communication between subjects and knowledge of oneself is always barred, partial and fragmented. Describing the analytic task of identifying the buried, encrypted life story or secrets of the subject as a kind of piecing together of a jigsaw puzzle, Abraham and Torok articulate the analysand's experience in terms of a series of 'broken symbols', that must be tracked backward, as they search for their missing counterpart in order to reveal the secret. The secret is not repressed in the Freudian sense of the term, that is, recoverable in other sublimated activities or processes, but is instead locked away, encrypted within the subject. This crypt remains unspoken and unarticulated, as though a foreign body wedged inside the unconscious. The secret is not to be found in the analysand's discourse, but is instead only to be identified in those gaps, breaks, distortions and discontinuities.

Certain secrets locked within the subject are even harder to track down, due to the fact that the traumatic encounter is not their own secret, but that of another family member. Family secrets, Abraham and Torok claim, are those traumas unwittingly passed down to younger generations, who inherit them, without ever knowing what they are. This 'transgenerational haunting' renders the analytic subject as a kind of unconscious ventriloquist, who has inherited the secrets of someone else, now locked inside themselves as a phantom, the carrier of the secret whose 'aim it is to wreak havoc [...] in the coherence of logical

progression'.<sup>33</sup> What returns to haunt is the 'unsaid' and 'unsayable' of another, presenting an altogether different, secret history and psychic life than the consciously lived one.

In chapter four I introduce the idea of the phantom as a way of thinking through the problems of inheritance at work in the artistic homage as a series of ruptures. Literary critic Harold Bloom terms the breaking away from one's predecessor as a process of 'kenosis' in his work on the 'anxiety of influence'.<sup>34</sup> 'Kenosis' is 'a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor'.<sup>35</sup> It is Bloom's understanding of 'kenosis' as a series of discontinuities, of 'emptying out' that serves as a useful model for negotiating Nauman's engagement with the work of both Westermann and Henry Moore. Bloom's account of the various methods by which influence is passed down is, however, fundamentally Oedipal, a series of breaks in which the sons must turn upon their fathers. I pitch Abraham and Torok's theory of the 'transgenerational phantom' against Bloom's Oedipal trajectory of inheritance, as a family secret, rather than a family romance which troubles later generations.

Employing Abraham and Torok's concept of the 'phantom effect', I posit Samaras, Bontecou and Westermann as 'secret' in terms of their exclusion from dominant accounts of the period, and, more importantly, in terms of the way in which their works function *as* secrets, or 'secretive' in some way. Operating as secrets, these artists who have been quite literally remaindered in the footnotes of the period were unwittingly inherited and passed along amongst their contemporaries and, transgenerationally, so that the 'phantom effects' of their objects are still tangible today. Samaras, Bontecou and Westermann are cast in this thesis as examples of 'modernism's phantoms', a kind of rejoinder to recent work that has drawn attention to modernism's blind spots, what Rosalind Krauss described as Modernism's 'optical unconscious'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Nicolas Abraham, 'The Phantom of Hamlet, or The Sixth Act: Preceded by the Intermission of Truth', in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1, Chicago, 1994, p. 291.

<sup>34</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York and Oxford, 1997.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, MA, 1993.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **‘Materialized Secrets’: Lucas Samaras and Small-Scale Boxes**

One of the most frequently rehearsed formats in twentieth century art is that of the box. From Duchamp’s *Boîte en Valise*, the Surrealist dream worlds-in-boxes of Joseph Cornell, the Fluxus boxes of George Maciunas and Robert Watts, and the cubic structures of the Minimalists, concepts of interior and exterior, space and containment, together with the attendant phantasmatic encounters that they stage, have been persistent. It is not a history of the box that is my concern here, although it remains a story worth telling. Nor do I intend to trace a lineage of Surrealist influence upon later artists. Rather, I want to set the stage for an encounter with the small-scale boxes made by Lucas Samaras during the 1960s, in particular the way in which they enact strategies of resistance and secrecy.<sup>1</sup>

Encrusted with glass jewels and beads, covered in tight concentric swirls of brightly coloured yarn, pierced with hundreds of pins, crammed full with cotton wool, stuffed birds, photographs, syringes, knives and hidden compartments, the boxes made by Samaras during the sixties could be seen to condense elements as diverse as Surrealism, Neo-Dada, Assemblage and Pop.<sup>2</sup> Just as the Minimalists explored the seemingly endless permutations of geometric structure, so Samaras also repeated and returned to the box again and again. Instead of paring down, hollowing out and simplifying, however, Samaras sought to conceal hidden objects and layers within his boxes, camouflaging exterior surfaces and displacing interior spaces. He altered the viewing conditions the box demanded, by reducing its scale or rendering its surface dangerous to touch. From his earliest plaster and rag stuffed found boxes, to the slightly later second-hand nineteenth century jewellery boxes and ‘sewing boxes’ Samaras would ‘strip’ before re-covering, to the factory-made, complex structures with jewels and other glittering materials

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this chapter was published in *Object*, no. 4, London, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The centrality of the box in modern art is something many writers on Samaras have commented on. Joan Siegfried opens her 1971 essay on Samaras’s ‘Boxes’ exhibition with the statement ‘The box is a universal form in the twentieth century’. ‘On Peering into Lucas Samaras’s Boxes’, in *Lucas Samaras: Boxes*, Chicago, 1971, unpaginated.

stuck to their surface, Samaras's boxes embody processes of secrecy and encryption.<sup>3</sup>

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In his sparsely decorated New York apartment, at 101 Spring Street SoHo, Donald Judd kept a box by Lucas Samaras next to his bed. *Box No.48* (Ill. 1.1), made in 1966, is one of Samaras's larger box constructions, complete with hinged lid that opens and closes. It is a jewel-covered, bead-filled container, with a bisected interior that contains, in the smaller portion, a large hypodermic syringe with a small globe of the world attached to the needle point. The larger section of the interior is filled with a mass of pearly-pink elongated beads, encased underneath a sheet of glass like a macabre mausoleum of false nails. Painted onto the glass in rainbow stripes is the outlined image of two splayed skeletal hands, placed palm down as if pressing the glass sheet into place. On the inside of the box lid, and held in place by a series of equidistantly spaced pins, is the original black and white X-ray from which the image of the painted hands has been taken, appearing as though a ghostly imprint or reflection of their technicolour double. The entire exterior surface of the box has been covered in thousands of gold-coloured glass beads and, from the side of the box protrudes one hundred or so yellow HB pencils, slotted into a secret compartment or drawer at the bottom of the box. When closed, the interior is hidden from view, with only the glistening gold surface and sharpened pencils on display. Two large, sharp kitchen knives have been thrust into the sides, slicing through the exterior of the box right into its centre.

Describing Samaras's work as 'messy, improbable' and 'exceptional', in an earlier review of his show at the Green Gallery, New York in 1962, Judd drew attention to the works' 'threatening quality', claiming that they function as 'mental, and sometimes actual, cacti'.<sup>4</sup> Judd is referring here to *Untitled* (Ill. 1.2)

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<sup>3</sup> Many thanks to Lucas Samaras for his time and thoughtful responses to my questions and queries, and for showing me so many of the works under discussion in this chapter, which are kept now in the artist's private collection.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Judd, *The Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax and New York, 1975, p. 45.

from 1961, a liquid aluminium and sculptural relief by Samaras. This work has a roughly moulded lumpy surface from which protrudes a straightened-out safety pin that sticks out from the confines of the picture surface into the viewing space of the viewer. This straightened pin performs a reverse of the pin's 'safety', threatening an assault on the viewer, a threat that finds its counterpart in the sharpened protruding pencils and dagger-sharp knives that puncture the surface of *Box No.48*. The large knives that have been stabbed into the sides of this box rupture the safe viewing conditions of the spectator at the same time they pierce and disrupt the Minimal space of Judd's apartment.

The photograph of *Box No.48* (Ill. 1.3 and Ill. 1.4) situated next to Judd's bed is a paradoxical image in the context of the Minimal space of his apartment.<sup>5</sup> Placed in the realm of dream, phantasy and sex, this image evokes the arresting, eroticised psychic charge of the Surrealist *objet trouvé* at the same time as its cubic form unmistakably apes the geometric structures of Minimalism. Rather than pointing to a sense of continuity or alliance between Judd and Samaras's work, however, what interests me here is the ease with which the knife slices through the two, deliberately brought together at an intersection that is marked not by a link but by a literal cut. The knives in *Box No.48* pierce the interior of the box at the same time as their handles jut away, cutting into the surrounding space and functioning as an aggressive intrusion that, I argue, puts pressure on how we think about the box and its surrounding environment.

The same year Samaras made *Box No.48* found Minimalist Carl Andre also working through the different ways in which he too could 'cut' into space. With his 1966 *Equivalent VIII* series of one hundred and twenty fire bricks placed on the floor in a variety of different serial permutations, Andre sought to radically renegotiate the viewing conditions of contemporary sculpture, by 'razing' it to the ground and away from the pedestal. One year later, in 1967, Andre exhibited *Eight Cuts* (Ill. 1.5), in which he laid out a series of fire bricks again, although this time with sections removed that echo in negative the rows of fire bricks

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, in his bedroom, Judd also had a large John Chamberlain piece on the wall, as well as one of his own wall-mounted works, and a large Dan Flavin light piece, that runs the length of his loft. Thank you to James Meyer for pointing me in the direction of this image.

previously laid out in *Equivalent VIII*. Andre said 'Up to a certain time I was cutting into things. Then I realized that the thing I was cutting was the cut. Rather than cut into the material, I now use the material as the cut in space'.<sup>6</sup> Just as Samaras sought to 'cut' into the outside space surrounding his box, so Andre's concern was also with cutting into the spatial conditions of his sculpture.

In 1961, Samaras had also made a floor piece from sixteen squares of roughly moulded sculptmetal tiles (Ill. 1.6), anticipating the floor-bound work of Andre by several years. This strategy of cutting through space unites, then, Andre's Minimalism with Samaras's own working process, briefly coming together in the box by the bed in Judd's apartment. This shows exactly the kinds of uneasy connections and jarring intrusions that Samaras, and other artists, for example Hesse and Westermann, engender—as Samaras said, 'I like making incisions'.<sup>7</sup> Another intrusion or 'cutting' into the space of the Minimal finds Judd and Samaras brought together once again, this time not in the privacy of Judd's home, but in the public arena of the Green Gallery whilst attending a Robert Morris exhibition. In another instance of a real dialogue between the Minimal and Samaras's work, Judd recalls himself and Samaras walking around Morris' show and knocking *Column* over, before then pushing it around the gallery floor in order to demonstrate what they felt to be its 'formal inadequacies'.<sup>8</sup>

For all this common ground between Samaras and Minimalism, the threatening overtones of violence in *Box No.48* stage a fundamentally tactile encounter in a way that the Minimal cube or 'box' does not, whether the spectator is a willing participant or not. A visceral assault on both the eye and the hand, the twin poles of the haptic and the optic are jarringly brought together in this box. Breaching the divide between exterior and the interior space, the sheer surfaces of Judd's structures and the intimate, clustered ones of Samaras's, the knives in *Box No.48* do more than threaten to physically harm the viewer. They threaten also to inflict damage on the space and status of the object itself, by collapsing distinctions

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Andre, as quoted in David Bourdon, 'The Razed Sites of Carl Andre' [1966], as reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, p. 104

<sup>7</sup> Lucas Samaras, as quoted in Kim Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, New York, 1975, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Judd, as quoted in James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 60s*, New Haven and London, 2001, p. 52.

between its liminal boundaries of inside and out, surface and centre with their hidden compartments, extendable partitions, fixed and hinged lids and secret drawers.

Kim Levin, an early writer and occasional collaborator on Samaras's work, highlights the emphasis on the haptic that Samaras's boxes deliberately invite. She points out that there are 'hidden surprises that are revealed only if the spectator shifts the contents',<sup>9</sup> because, with his work, it is always 'necessary to touch'.<sup>10</sup> The suggestion of the drawers being like those 'secret' drawers of the writing bureau, or false bottoms of cupboards and cases also points to the displacement of what one may access or know about the object. The excessive cramming of his boxes with 'stuff', such as threads, pins, photographs, and stuffed birds, is an uncanny reminder of forgotten cupboards, old houses and junk-filled attics. Whilst for Judd the opening up of his structures was a necessary move in order that they were made 'less mysterious, less ambiguous,'<sup>11</sup> for Samaras it is exactly that strategy of privation that provides the key to his works.

The psychic dimension of the box as harbouring secrets is suggestively rendered through that very process of cramming, by which the more the centre or contents are concealed, the more compelling and weighty they appear. The spectator's desire to know and own that secret centre is in constant relay, between excessive supply and access constantly thwarted. Activation of the box, particularly its interior, is a theme common to all Samaras's box constructions, the repetition of which evokes a language of secrecy and concealment.

The tactility of Samaras's boxes involves a radical revision of the kinds of encounter one would typically expect from sculpture. As we shall see, the possibility of viewing Samaras's work in any way other than a fragmented, partial one is impossible. Examination of these works is instead displaced to the viewer's own hand and, by extension, their body. Rather than offer any kind of

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<sup>9</sup> Levin, op.cit., p.74.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Judd, as quoted in John Coplans, *Donald Judd*, Pasadena, 1971, p. 36. The full quote reads: 'It's fairly logical to open it up so the interior can be viewed. It makes it less mysterious, less ambiguous'.

bodily empathy, as, for instance, Oldenburg's soft sculptures seem to invite, these boxes remain hostile to the viewer's touch, whilst at the same time demanding it. If touch might be understood as the undoing of Modernism's emphasis on the optical, then we might understand Samaras's box constructions as also attempting to wrong-foot the spectator through this emphasis on the tactile.<sup>12</sup>

Recast instead as an attack on previous models of viewing, the way in which the object is viewed in Samaras's case is 'razed' to the level of an encounter with a series of part-objects and fragmented aspects, a gaze that is riven by physical displacement. Later on in this chapter, I shall look at the ways in which the model of tactility that the small-scale box demonstrates has also been negotiated in the work of sculptor Eva Hesse, to rather different ends than Samaras, through their various treatments of surface and interiority. Rosalind Krauss and Marcia Tucker have suggested, in relation to the Minimalist object, that 'the art of the 1960s was an art of surfaces,'<sup>13</sup> although Samaras also perceives his work in similar terms. Samaras describes the difference between his surfaces and the surfaces of Judd's objects in terms of excess, pointing out that whilst, with his boxes that open up and out, with lids, drawers and folding panels, he had 'hundreds of skins or surfaces', Judd, with his clean pared-down structures, 'had only a few'.<sup>14</sup>

In the catalogue for his 1972 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Samaras explains his fascination with the box form, claiming 'the access to boxes came with the decision to cover them with something. [...] I subverted their

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Briony Fer's, 'Drawing is a Dry World', paper on Vija Celmins, at the 'Visibility of Women's Practice' conference at Tate Britain, London, Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2003 addressed this aspect of the tactile and opticality. For the most famous Modernist account of spectatorship which appeals to eyesight alone, see Michael Fried, 'Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella', originally published as the catalogue essay for the show of the same name Fried curated at the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1965. Reprinted in his *Art and Objecthood*, Chicago, 1998, p. 227. Alex Potts also addresses the changing modes of viewing and experiencing sculpture in his *Sculptural Imagination*, op.cit., See in particular the section on the 'phenomenological turn' of sculpture in the sixties and his discussion of Greenberg and Fried's attempts at addressing the materiality of sculpture in their Modernist accounts of art that place primary importance on the 'optical' rather than haptic aspect of the work of art. Also, see Rosalind Krauss on the 'tactilization' of opticality in the work of Agnes Martin in *Bachelors*, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Rosalind Krauss and Marcia Tucker, 'Perceptual Fields', in *Critical Perspectives in American Art*, Amherst, MA, 1976, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Lucas Samaras, in conversation, April 2001, New York City.



geometry—buried it’.<sup>15</sup> He wanted to ‘re-camouflage’<sup>16</sup> their structure. To re-camouflage implies that what one is disguising has already undergone a transformation of some kind, that the initial process of camouflage has been worn through or exhausted, so that it is necessary for it to be camouflaged once again. A continual process of renewal by covering over and obscuring is carried out through the practice of ‘re-camouflaging’. In claiming that he ‘subverted’ the geometry of the box Samaras is inadvertently reversing Frank Stella’s famous Modernist dictum that with his works ‘what you see is what you see’,<sup>17</sup> itself a seemingly transparent statement of fact which also highlights the paradoxical nature of the art work. It is as if what one may come to know about an object is always already barred by those very viewing conditions of which it is a product. What you see is only what you see, and in Samaras’s case, the only thing available is one more layer of opacity. Nothing more may be known; you cannot get any closer than that. Camouflaging an already-camouflaged object simultaneously denies access to that centre whilst insisting on the importance of it, if only through that refusal.

Samaras plays with the assumptions we hold about surface and content, inside and out, in *Shoe Box* (Ill. 1.7) from 1965. A stiletto shoe with cut away portions has been placed on top of the lid which shifts our attention from its interior and focuses it instead on the exterior surface of the box which has been covered with swirls of brightly coloured yarns. The shoe has been stuffed with hundreds of shiny pins, haphazardly crammed in, spilling out of the gaps and over the ankle strap. From the interior of the semi-closed box spill wispy wads of cotton wool that pour out over the sides, like a barely captured cloud, or slit-open cushion, the containment of which is only just maintained. The placement of the stiletto shoe on top of the box indicates that the ideal viewing position of the box is with the lid closed, with the shoe remaining the focal point. To lift the lid and probe its contents or centre would involve moving the shoe from its position, or breaking it

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<sup>15</sup> Lucas Samaras, ‘On Boxes’, *Lucas Samaras*, New York, 1972, unpaginated.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Stella, as quoted in ‘Questions to Stella and Judd: an interview by Bruce Glaser’ [1966] reprinted in Battcock, op.cit., p.158. Stella is here invoking a Minimalist rhetoric of rational banality; the one thing after another logic of Judd. To deploy such rhetoric involved establishing a strategy whereby the object itself managed to thwart extrapolation and expansion beyond its immediate formal and material condition.

off. What is made clear is that this box should be closed, allowing only a brief glimpse of what may be 'inside'—that opaque cloud of cotton wool that leaks from the interior. The 'centre' of the box, then, *is* the shoe-lid. It is less about demarcating off the interior, that which is private, prohibited and closed, but about decentring the 'middle' of the box to the periphery.

*Box No.8* (Ill. 1.8) from 1963 on the other hand, is an extendable box, with the exterior strewn with spirals of coloured yarns that just fall short of concealing the hinges and edges of the compartment. It opens into a series of extendable drawers and lids. Photographs of the artist are pinned to the inside panels of the box, veiled by the strands of wool attached to his image with pins. The box's formal structure is like a triptych, with the two side panels facing outward and upward. The usually vertical space of the triptych-as-altarpiece is turned sideways, flattened to the level of a table surface or floor. This flattening of the side panels to the secular space of the table top, away from the religious aspect of the tryptich, points to the vernacular procedure of opening and closing rather than the religious suggestion of the reliquary or altarpiece. The centre of the box is unavailable as it has been covered over with an array of uncanny objects including a stuffed bird, gold coins and tangled strands of yarn. The centre of this box has again been displaced to the edges. The 'middle' of the box is filled to the limit of its containment, leaving almost nowhere for the viewer to 'look'. To open out (even partially) the framework of the box is to undo its formal property as 'box,' forcing us to question assumptions about the structure of the cube. The point at which we *are* given access demonstrates the opacity of its 'true' centre, that is, the structural core, of where we expect the 'middle' to be is, in fact, decentered. The drawers that open can never fully show off their contents, as the centre of the box, the space into which the drawer will eventually be slid, is always concealed. We are kept in the dark as to what lies at the centre.

*Untitled (Face box)* (Ill. 1.9) from 1963, is another work in which attention is drawn to the centre of the box whilst access to it is blocked. The partially-opened compartments suggest a yarn-stuffed central space. The assumption is that these multicoloured threads are viewed just at the limit of their containment, that they continue throughout the middle of the box. The possibility of truly knowing this,

however, is denied us. Again the surfaces have been crammed together, this time with hundreds of sharp spiky pins that give the box a glistening sheen. Every surface is covered with steel pins, clearly prohibiting entry, just as the photographs of Samaras that are stuck to the surface of the box also refuse us access to the artist himself, his image again effaced by pins. The middle of the box is made up of a series of drawers that open underneath it, the extension of which literally pulls the ground from beneath the centre of both the box's position and from the spectator whom the box seeks to constantly trick.

This wrong-footing of the spectator and disturbance of the viewing conditions of sculpture was to find its most famous articulation in Michael Fried's 1967 article 'Art and Objecthood', published in *Artforum* as a critique of Minimalism. 'Art and Objecthood' addresses the way in which large-scale Minimal structures are placed directly on the ground, demanding that the viewers move around them as though figures on a stage, which gives rise, Fried complains, to a fundamentally 'theatrical' encounter. What interests me is that Fried also, in a footnote to 'Art and Objecthood', lists the work of Samaras as a 'theatrical' object maker.<sup>18</sup> Fried claims 'It is theatricality, too, that links all these artists to other figures as disparate as Kaprow, Cornell, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Flavin, Smithson, Kienholz, Segal, Samaras, Christo, Kusama...the list could go on indefinitely'.<sup>19</sup> Virtually echoing Judd's list of 'Specific Object' makers of two years previously, Fried seems to be problematising the very category of what it is to be a Minimal, or 'literal' object, just as his essay apparently attempts to define it. I do not want to over-emphasise Fried's footnoted claims, nor re-tread the well-established critique of the term 'theatricality' as it is used in 'Art and Objecthood', which has already been most effectively carried out in recent literature.<sup>20</sup> I do not want to disagree with Fried's description of Samaras's work as 'theatrical', as it is clear that an element of theatre strongly inflects his constructions. What is important here, however, is Fried's insistence upon the theatricality of the 'literalists' as in some way *like* that of Samaras, Kienholz, etc.

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', [1967], reprinted in Gregory Battcock ed., *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, California, 1995, p.130, footnote 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> I'm thinking in particular of both Alex Potts (op.cit) and James Meyer's recent work on Fried's account of Minimalism in 'Art and Objecthood' (op.cit).

When Fried later outlines, in another footnote to this text, the Surrealist aspect of literalist objects, his account could almost read as a detailed description of a Samaras box. Fried writes, 'Both employ imagery that is at once wholistic and, in a sense, fragmentary, incomplete; both resort to a similar anthropomorphizing of objects or conglomerations of objects'.<sup>21</sup> My point is that claiming both a Minimal *and* Surrealist aspect to Samaras's work is not merely a simple conflation of two disparate models, employed to shore up my position so far, but in fact points to a relationship, buried at the heart of one the most important accounts of American sculptural practice of the sixties. One might add that the colourful, gaudy aspect of Samaras's boxes absolutely lend themselves to the charge of being 'theatrical', although it is not simply the object's appearance, but its place and situation in space that informs Fried's definition of 'theatre'.

The placing of sculpture on the floor which led to the charge of theatricality in the Minimal object seems rather at odds with what would happen if one of Samaras's boxes were placed on the ground, where it would most likely be stepped on or overlooked. As Alex Potts has pointed out 'an isolated, small-scale sculptural object is all too likely to strike one as mere thing or failed ornamental object unless it is staged so as to prompt one to think otherwise of it'.<sup>22</sup> Fried's problem with theatricality is bound up with the anthropomorphism of the work, as though it were a secret vessel or body. It was this capacity of the box or hollow three-dimensional object to function as container of a secret content that Fried picked up on in 'Art and Objecthood'. Writing about a work by Robert Morris, *Untitled*, Fried commented:

It is, as numerous commentators have remarked approvingly, as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life—an effect that is perhaps made most explicit in Morris' *Untitled* (1965-66).<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, it is not one of Morris's boxes that Fried is referring to, but a floor-bound ring, cast in fibreglass and made up of two identical sections, which are not

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 145, footnote 19.

<sup>22</sup> Potts, op.cit., p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in Battcock, op.cit., p. 129.

joined together but sit just a fraction apart. From the space between the two segments a fluorescent light casts a glow, the origin of which is not visible, creating that experience of an 'inner, even secret life' Fried identifies. What Fried is pointing to is something less stable in the work, an interiority that is beyond reach, a hollowness that becomes replete with signification and secret meaning. It is the 'almost blatantly anthropomorphic'<sup>24</sup> quality of the hollow, staged object that Fried finds disquieting.

Questions of the body and anthropomorphism were central to debates around sculpture during the sixties, in which 'anthropomorphism' became a 'loaded and ubiquitous term', that, Briony Fer explains 'veers from something very very good to something very very bad,'<sup>25</sup> in the kinds of bodily empathies it encourages between the viewer and the object. The 'hollowness' of the Minimalist work of art, that is, 'the quality of having an inside'<sup>26</sup> results, for Fried, in forms that are anthropomorphic, not, as Robert Morris claims, 'obdurate, solid masses'.<sup>27</sup> It is the insides of the works that has provoked Fried's response then. The interior space of sculpture often invokes psychically charged readings, with the hollow container standing for so many inert, bodily analogues.<sup>28</sup>

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It is the insides of the box, which, for Fried were so 'blatantly anthropomorphic' that had also captured the imagination of earlier artists working with the box, although their focus was not on the bodily associations of that interior but its structural nature, that is, the box as a container *of* something. Unlike Samaras's interest in subverting where we think the 'centre' or focal point of the box is, the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> Briony Fer, 'Objects Beyond Objecthood', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, pp. 25-36, p. 30. In this article, Fer addresses questions of anthropomorphism in relation to the work of Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, asking what kind of spectatorial encounter these works evoke, specifically in relation to the kind of subjectivity they posit.

<sup>26</sup> Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in Battcock, op.cit. p. 129.

<sup>27</sup> Fried quoting Robert Morris in 'Art and Objecthood', Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Alloway, *Lucas Samaras: Selected Works 1960-1966*, New York, 1966, p. 9. In this catalogue essay Alloway comments on the range of libidinalised, bodily readings Samaras's boxes have prompted. Such readings dominate writings on Samaras's work, whose boxes seemingly invite a welter of metaphoric interpretations as vociferous eroticised bodily cavities that the artist does not entirely dispute, claiming in 1963, 'A box is a mouth, certainly', as quoted in Levin, op.cit., p. 46.

spectator has typically been expected to look inside, to understand the box in relation to its having a 'content'. In 1937, André Breton created *Song-Object* for Dora Maar, a small cardboard box with objects and a poem inside. Although decorated with a floral motif and elegant printed writing, it is not the exterior of the box that demands one's attention, but the poem and objects concealed inside. Another box, Breton's *Page-Object* (Ill. 1.10) from 1934, is a small, wooden hinged box, split into three compartments, the outer two of which contain glass eyes, the central section a feather fly for fishing. Attached to *Song-Object* and *Page Object* is a suggestion of privacy, indicating through their containment, the intimate nature of the objects and the poem. This sense of privacy in Breton's boxes is emphasised by his dedication of each of them to another person, as an intimate homage to someone else. The box is for another—a secret or private gift or offering. Paying homage to another through the medium of the box has become something of a commonplace in twentieth-century art. Perhaps stemming from the spatial metaphors of the home or the coffin, or, in the realm of art, the tradition of the reliquary or *memento mori*, the box seems to provide the best means through which to commemorate another, as though a condensation of elements, a summing up or encapsulation of that person's 'spirit'.<sup>29</sup>

The box was a form employed by several other Surrealist artists, as was the notion of the homage, for example, Man Ray's shrouded and bound sewing machine, *The Riddle or The Enigma of Issadore Ducasse*, a homage to the poetry of Lautreamont, whom the Surrealists so admired.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most famous 'Surrealist' box-homage is Duchamp's *Boîte en Valise* (Ill. 1.11), a typically tongue in cheek take on the notion of homage in which the subject is himself. Containing miniature versions of his own work, this portable museum seems to be a project of self-commemoration tinged with the macabre suggestion that it functions also at the level of a *memento mori*, with Duchamp's own life ironically celebrated in this box at the height of his success. Whilst other writers have often

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<sup>29</sup> In chapter four, I discuss the series of 'light trap' photographs taken by Bruce Nauman in relation to the way in which he sought to 'trap the spirit' of another. These works are each dedicated to another artist, part of a wider group of works in which Nauman created homages to others. For an example of the spatial metaphoric of the house see Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas Boston, 1994, which I return to once more toward the end of this chapter.

<sup>30</sup> I return to this work in chapter four. (See Ill. 4.8).

also understood Samaras's boxes as *memento mori*, related to an archaic past of Byzantine relics, I would suggest that the mismatched eclecticism of his works, like Duchamp's *Boîte en Valise*, shares more with a seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities. As Emily Apter has argued, the cabinet of curiosity found its nineteenth-century equivalent in the feverish collecting habits of the middle and upper classes in fin de siècle Paris, with the rise of 'bric-a-bracomania', as the bourgeois interior 'became increasingly like a museum' and modes of viewing and display took on aspects of 'peering' and voyeurism. Although Apter describes this in terms of the fetish, I shall shift the focus away from the fetishism which remains the most prevalent interpretation of Samaras's work.<sup>31</sup>

Jasper Johns's *In Memory of My Feelings - Frank O'Hara* (Ill. 1.12), begun in 1961, is another small-scale box that also seeks to pay homage, although in this instance it shares with Samaras that sense of intimacy, concealment and the thwarted promise of access to its centre. Like his earlier 1955 *Target with Plaster Casts* that featured, above the encaustic surface of the target, a set of small wooden boxes or compartments containing casts of various body parts, *In Memory of My Feelings - Frank O'Hara* also features a cast concealed within a wooden box.<sup>32</sup> Inside this small box is a plaster cast of the foot of Johns' friend, curator and poet Frank O'Hara, adhered to the underside of the lid, which, when closed, presses down into the sand which is in the bottom of the box. The moment of contact is concealed and we see only the before and after of the event; the plaster foot and the smooth sandy surface, and then, after the lid has been closed shut and then re-opened, the footprint. Imbued with a sense of intimacy and secrecy, the box itself performs the moment of that secret imprint. This is reminiscent of the intimate containment of Breton's boxes and those skeletal hands imprinted on the sheet of glass inside Samaras's *Box No.48*. When closed, *In Memory of My Feelings - Frank O'Hara* is a plain wooden box, concealing its interior which, when revealed, shows its apparently hollow empty inside to be replete with

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Apter, 'Cabinet Secrets: Peep Show, Prostitution, and Bric-a-bracomania in the Fin-de-Siècle Interior', in *Feminising the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn of the Century France*, Ithaca, 1991, p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> See Fred Orton on Jasper Johns' sculptures, in *Jasper Johns: The Sculptures*, Leeds, 1996, and also his *Figuring Jasper Johns*, London, 1994.

memory, nostalgia, and an echo of the bodily, a foot registered in the sand through its absence.

It was that encounter between the viewer and the box which, by the early sixties, the neo-dadaist Fluxus artists also sought to reanimate. Working in the early sixties, Robert Watts and George Maciunas designed a number of inexpensive boxes, filled with accumulated objects and games.<sup>33</sup> Although sale of these small-scale boxes was encouraged, due to their cheaply made and reproducible nature, they sought to strip the object of any real or aesthetic value, removing the boxes from the public, large scale category of 'sculpture' to what they perceived as a more 'non-art', private realm. Another work by Maciunas also brings together the category of the box and the notion of homage in a playful way. In his 1962 performance *Homage to Walter de Maria*, Maciunas typed and distributed instructions that required the participants to move de Maria's boxes from one location to another 'by the most difficult route' possible, suggesting that homage in this instance means something more than veneration, more like a continuation or inheritance of another's project as play, through simply rearranging it.

This playful reconfiguration of another's project is seen again, of course, in Robert Morris' 1961 sealed wooden box which contains a tape recording that plays back the sounds Morris made whilst making the box. *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (Ill. 1.13) was Morris' homage to Duchamp's 1916 *With Hidden Noise* (Ill. 1.14), a ball of twine sandwiched between two square metal plates that contains a hidden object inside which makes a noise when the box is shaken. This is not a continuation of Duchamp's project, but rather, Morris is here re-casting Duchamp's cryptic object in the 'what you see is what you see' rhetoric of the

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<sup>33</sup> See Benjamin Buchloh, 'Robert Watts: Animate Objects, Inanimate Subjects', in his *Neo-Avant-Gardes and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art, 1955-1975*, Cambridge, MA, 2000, for a discussion of the boxes by Watts, and Fluxus strategies in general for the ways in which they use the readymade object, games and play as a way of altering object relations in a way that seeks to critique the commodity culture they are inextricably caught up within. Buchloh writes 'Fluxus aspires neither to the open spaces of obsolescence nor to the radical transformation of everyday life, but rather to the ludic practices that open up sudden ruptures within that system's mesmerizing totality and numbing continuity'. p. 551. See also *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, New York, 1988 for an account of the Fluxus artists and their works.



Minimal object, although interestingly, in an aural, not visual register, as Morris chose to keep the contents of his box secret and unavailable to see.

By the early sixties, the trope of the Surrealist box had been replaced by the 'Minimal box', with all its attendant anxieties over anthropomorphism, hollowness and interiority, although it was not a form owned exclusively by Minimalism—Judd, in fact, never made an entirely closed 'box'. Almost as soon as the trope of the box was established, it became subject to reinterpretation, from Hans Haacke's casting a box in plexiglas and turning it into a mini ecosystem (*Condensation Cube*, 1963-65), to Sol LeWitt's taking a box outside and burying it (*Box in a Hole*, 1968), and Robert Morris's later box cabinet which he built climbed inside it (*Box for Standing*, 1961).

To an extent, as many critics have remarked, Samaras's boxes run the gamut of Surrealism, Dada, Neo-Dada and Pop art, incorporating aspects of each of the above examples, whilst fitting none of these categories entirely. Samaras sees his work as being 'pre-pop', what he describes as the 'brother' or darker flip side to the Pop world of ephemera and celebration of the kitsch and everyday.<sup>34</sup> Kim Levin describes the kinds of desires that Samaras's boxes are caught up with as diametrically opposed to the consumer driven desires of, say Oldenburg's *The Store*, claiming he was 'expressing not a greed for products and technology but an insatiable hunger of the psyche'.<sup>35</sup> A consumption that, for Levin, functions in the register of the psychic, a desire to know and possess exceeding the consumption of convenience goods and products, although I would question the validity of this separation of the two as wholly unrelated aspects, as it hardly seems adequate to see Warhol or Oldenburg as celebratory. Samaras's recent inclusion in the 'Les Années Pop' show at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, in 2001, situated his work alongside that of West coast artists Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz, as well as Robert Watts' *Box of Eggs* from 1963.<sup>36</sup> They were placed in a room that sought to reveal the darker side to Pop art, with objects and sculptures crushed, bound,

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<sup>34</sup> Lucas Samaras, in conversation, April 2001, New York City.

<sup>35</sup> Levin, op.cit., p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Buchloh describes works such as this in terms of Watts performing a shift in the status of the object from the organic and corporeal into the realm of representation, where the 'natural' presence of the object is instead subjected to 'the same regime of design as are the objects of everyday design'. Buchloh, op.cit., p. 547. 548

dirtied and mangled, a kind of defunct pop, or oppressive reminder of the dangers of the consumer world from which they have been extracted. Samaras's *Box No.3* (Ill. 1.15) was shown in Paris, alongside his *Dinner No.5* from 1963, featuring a hand mirror and a dessert bowl filled with an unctuous gloop of yarn caught in glue, and a box of pins wrapped in coloured wool, all of which rest on a bed of pins.

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However, it is American Surrealist Joseph Cornell's prolonged engagement with the box that has dominated all subsequent accounts of how to think about small-scale boxes, for, as Joan Siegfried has pointed out, for any artist concerned with it as a 'compositional device', 'the box would mean Cornell'.<sup>37</sup> Cornell's boxes are often referred to in relation to Samaras's boxes, although his whimsical worlds-in-boxes and surreal scenarios have little in common with Samaras's darker, more macabre creations, which, as critic Kay Larson wrote, 'virtually smoke with psychic intensity'.<sup>38</sup> Larson describes Samaras's work as 'almost radioactive' compared to Cornell's 'intimate, dreamy, mysterious, romantic' universes, although, for all their intimacy and psychically enveloped interiors, for Larson the fundamental difference between the two lies in their different engagement with surfaces and the exterior of the box.<sup>39</sup>

Cornell does not place his own image within his boxes, although he often features images of other people. Samaras, on the other hand, frequently incorporates his own photographic image into his work, pierced with strands of yarn, stacked loosely in the centre, or neatly scored and outlined with a row of pins. Although no obvious narrative or storytelling element is presented by Samaras, it is clear that his works are, in some way secret, they are private and profess to be all about

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<sup>37</sup> ~~Ibid.~~ Siegfried, *op.cit.*, unpaginated

<sup>38</sup> Kay Larson, *New York Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Reviewing a show of Samaras's work, Larson wrote: 'A box is a concentrated universe. Joseph Cornell's cosmos was intimate, dreamy, mysterious, romantic. Samaras's boxes seem almost radioactive. They are covered in a seamless, scaly skin of shells, beads, and glass baubles, buoying up dangerous-looking things: barbed fishing lures, a poisonous snake's head, a tarantula, a scorpion, lovers in psychically lethal tangles, and the artist himself, whose face floats amid the beads as a coded warning and a reminder'.

himself, embodiments of what Robert Smithson was to describe as Samaras's 'lingering narcissism'.<sup>40</sup> This is not the case with Cornell's boxes, however. The fragments of text, the dolls, scenarios staged and objects lodged within his boxes' interiors are typically contained within only three sides, with the fourth replaced with glass so that our gaze, if not our touch, is actively invited in.<sup>41</sup>

The narcissistic element of Samaras's boxes is often remarked upon, and is something the artist is himself keen to acknowledge in his work. Samaras's book of photographs and texts, *Samaras Album*, contains many of the artist's Polaroid self-portraits, many of which use a double exposure in order to produce a double portrait of the artist, so that he appears as though hugging or kissing himself. Samaras's many writings also invoke a narcissistic model of subjectivity, in which his own body and phantasies structure the stories he tells.<sup>42</sup> In his writing, Samaras employs a mode of writing in which punctuation and grammatical structure are replaced with the infantile babble and scatological obsession of a child, in which he obsesses about sex, and his relationships with women and his mother. Self-consciously operating on a psychoanalytic register of infantile drives and narcissistic investments, Samaras's texts (and later photographs) often invoke oral and sadistic motifs, suggesting in turn a Kleinian reading of pre-symbolic operations functioning at the level of the drives, although these later works are at odds, I argue, with these earlier boxes made prior to the more erotic and sexually charged works.

What Samaras's boxes share with Cornell's work is a process of encryption, that is to say, within each of their works is borne out the suggestion of a secret buried within the structure, or concealed in its surfaces, the revealing of which they both

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Smithson wrote that Samaras's boxes contain 'a lingering Narcissism', in his article 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space', [1966] reprinted in *Collected Writings*, California, Jack Flam ed., 1996, p. 34. The narcissistic element of Samaras's boxes is often remarked upon, and is something the artist is himself keen to acknowledge in his work. See also Martin Friedman, 'The Obsessive Images of Lucas Samaras's', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 8, November, 1966, pp. 20-23 and Grace Glueck, 'Celebrating Many Lucas Samaras's', *New York Times*, Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1996. Samaras was also included in the 1968 show 'The Obsessive Image', in London, see Mario Amaya, and Ronald Penrose, *The Obsessive Image*, London, 1968.

<sup>41</sup> Not all of Cornell's boxes were glass-fronted cabinets, of course. Many had lids that opened and closed, although, with their moveable sections and trinkets neatly lodged inside, they present more a scenario of curiosity than implied damage to the viewer.

<sup>42</sup> See Lucas Samaras, *Crude Delights*, New York, 1980.

stave off. Samaras demonstrates this through an encryption of his works' surfaces, whilst Cornell achieves this through an internalisation of content with each box standing alone, hermetically sealed, as if a private world or universe absolutely outside of this one. It is this refusal to yield fixed meanings that connects Samaras most strikingly to Surrealism's more successful objects.<sup>43</sup>

In 1967, to mark the occasion of Cornell's first solo show in New York at the Guggenheim Museum, Samaras was asked by the editors of *Arts Magazine* to write something about Cornell for publication. Rather than a full-length article, Samaras chose to write about Cornell without the conventions of 'sentence structure', instead contributing a brief paragraph and full-page homage, with a reproduction of one of Cornell's three-sided, glass-fronted boxes on the facing page.<sup>44</sup> The three-page entry is entitled 'Cornell Size', and, in the paragraph preceding the homage-image, Samaras wrote

I used to think of size as something constant. His [Cornell's] pieces were small. Now I think differently. Things are as big as the amount of space they fill in the field of vision. Up close his works are enormous.<sup>45</sup>

The mode of looking that Cornell's boxes demand then, for Samaras, is intimate, up-close and focused, through which the works loom large, filling the viewer's 'field of vision'. In a way, Samaras echoes the claims Mark Rothko had made for his large-scale paintings, which, for all their monumental scale, sought to generate an intimate encounter that, like Samaras's small-scale boxes, also implicated the viewer within its frame.<sup>46</sup> The same year that he wrote the above paragraph on

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<sup>43</sup> As well as the small boxes made by André Breton, I am thinking in particular of the surrealist *objet trouvé*, such as the iron mask and slipper-spoon Giacometti and Breton stumbled upon in a flea market. The bronze cast of Nadja's dropped glove is another instance of the cryptic surrealist object. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, MA, 1997, for a discussion of the *objet trouvé*, and Margaret Iversen's recent work on the 'found' and 'lost' object, presented at the AAH conference ARTiculations, London, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Lucas Samaras, 'Cornell Size', *Arts Magazine*, May 1967, pp. 45-47, p. 45. Illustrated in 'Cornell Size' are, on the first page Cornell's *Medici Coin Slot Machine* (1942), on the second page, *Cockatoo: Keepsake Parakeet* (1949-53), and on the final page, *Suite de la Longitude* (c.1957).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rothko said, 'I want to be very intimate and human...However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command', as quoted in Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, New Haven and London, 1989, p. 7.

Cornell, Samaras published his article 'An Exploratory Dissection of Seeing' in *Artforum*, in which he wrote

Our three-dimension oriented language makes us accept surfaces as terminal and visually impenetrable. We see by touch, and when we touch we feel what we touch touching us.<sup>47</sup>

Samaras is countering here the Modernist assertion of the primacy of the eye and gaze, instead positing a more visceral, tactile engagement with those surfaces that, far from projecting impenetrability instead invite our touch and penetration of its form. At issue in each of these paragraphs are the conditions under which we look at sculpture and the language which we use to describe that encounter: the first takes as its focus the intimate mode of looking that small-scale boxes demand and the second explains this mode of looking in terms of touch, as a physical experience not accounted for in 'three-dimensionally' oriented language. Inviting a model of viewing and description that calls upon bodily experience in order to explain visual effect, Samaras offers a complication of the haptic and optic, that is, of spatial relations between the subject and the object, as '[a]mbiguity presents itself in the struggle between the sense of touch and the sense of sight'.<sup>48</sup> To an extent, of course, Samaras's claims are very much of their time, with his focus on the contingency of scale and size echoing the phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty and gestalt-based writings of Robert Morris.

What is at stake in Samaras's writing here, however, is a fundamentally violent, intrusive model of vision and touch, of cutting and being cut, that is missing from other contemporary writings on sculpture. 'Our eyes', Samaras writes, 'seldom stay in one place. The[y] scan—envelope objects'.<sup>49</sup> From his claim that he likes 'making incisions' and the title of his treatise on looking which he calls a 'dissection', it is clearly the violent, visceral encounter Samaras's boxes invoke that distinguishes his model of spectatorial encounter from his contemporaries and which differentiates his surfaces, or 'skins' as he has also called them, from those of both Judd and Cornell.

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<sup>47</sup> Lucas Samaras, 'An Exploratory Dissection of Seeing', *Artforum*, no. 6, December, 1967, pp. 26-27, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

The pressure under which the small-scale box places the spectator is more partial than the bodily assault Fried claims for the Minimal object. While Cornell's boxes contain objects of 'affluence and cruelty, of secrecy and panoply'<sup>50</sup> also found in Samaras's work, they do not intrude on my viewing position. With their surreal tableaux safely contained, Cornell's boxes do not pose any immediate threat to me and, whilst they might effect me psychically, the danger is never explicit, unlike the violently real aspect of Samaras's knives and pins that press into me, damaging my hands and eyes.

It is not, then an all-over bodily threat, but a more partial, bodily attack that Samaras stages. His boxes threaten a violent assault on the eye or the hand. There is a danger in the placement of the pins that promise to pierce the eye, just as the jutting knives of *Box No.48* threaten to also puncture or slash it; a danger echoed in the suggestion of potential harm to the fingers or hand that handles the box, or probes the inside space. These elements of danger, violence and potential loss structure the viewing conditions of Samaras's boxes, bringing the two poles of the haptic and the optic under a shared rubric of implied and actual violence.

The homage to Cornell that Samaras made for *Arts Magazine* (Ill. 1.16) is at first glance merely a reproduction of Cornell's 1949-53 *Cockatoo: Keepsake Parakeet*, a predominantly white, glass-fronted box, with a single drawer at the bottom, containing in the upper section an image of a cockatoo. Over the top of this reproduction Samaras has typed 'CORNELL' in uniform rows of eleven across and sixty-five down. Scanning the page, this appears an odd image, raising the question why has Samaras chosen to repeatedly superimpose Cornell's name over the top of one of his boxes? It is only on closer looking that it becomes clear 'CORNELL' is not the only word that appears on the page and that, intersected at random points between Cornell's name, Samaras has secreted other words and verbs, selected from a 1936 edition of Webster's dictionary (the year of Samaras's birth). Mixing these words up with Cornell's name, Samaras hoped that his

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

‘plucked words would ooze blip and vanish residuing back his name, that is his work’.<sup>51</sup> The words Samaras selected were, in this order:

Conures cradles abludes details untimes cuddles incubes  
inmasks unveils illumines lockets locules alludes whitens lucent  
dements replays psyches winnow reduces mirrors cyclics  
inwoods enmists semines dangles serials gambles windows  
laments revives gymnics finites thences entraps inhives artizes  
inhumes inheres unwraps shrouds wizards absents reworks  
aerates empasms addicts travels murmurs inculks silkens  
immunes repeats endures abducts sculpts.<sup>52</sup>

As the eye wanders across the lines, focusing in and out, drifting and scanning, peering and staring, these ‘hidden’ words haunt the page, surging forward and blurring indistinctly; some are easily picked out, others instead ‘ooze blip and vanish’, painting a word-portrait of Cornell that, for Samaras ‘is’ his work. ‘Inmasks’ and ‘unveils’; ‘illumines’ and ‘lockets’; ‘entraps’ and ‘winnows’; ‘unwraps’ and ‘shrouds’, ‘absents’ and ‘repeats’; ‘endures’ and ‘abducts’: Samaras has built up a portrait of Cornell through a list of words that oppose, compete with and dispel each other, a feverish list of words hoarded up and secreted within the very structure of Cornell’s work.

As we pull back and look from a more comfortable, relaxed distance from the page, the concealed words fall away, ‘residuing back’ Cornell’s name, so something of that active, violently-charged mode of looking is lost. Samaras’s initial choice was not to list words in this manner, but to ‘chisel’ them into ‘everybody’s eyeballs’.<sup>53</sup> He wanted to stage a physical encounter, to score the image into the eye. Lacking the ‘power’ to perform such a visceral act, he was left only with language, a poor substitute for the model of looking Samaras wants to emulate in his ‘portrait’ of Cornell. I argue that this portrait is less Samaras’s homage to the master of whimsy and surreal narrative, than a reading of Cornell’s work that is shot through with Samaras’s own interests in relation to the box and in the dynamics of looking.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>53</sup> Samaras, ‘Dissection of Seeing’, op.cit., p. 26.

This 'portrait' of Cornell is another of Samaras's 'hundreds of surfaces', a web of words cast over the object as though a dazzling ray of light, what he calls in another context 'a fluid coating of matter'.<sup>54</sup> An excess of language, shot-through with light and luminosity ('whitens' 'illumes' 'luents' 'mirrors' 'windows') that conceals the object beneath even as it seeks to bring it into focus. Instead of constructing a box-homage or portrait of Cornell, Samaras has chosen to fill in the blank where we might expect a three-dimensional object to be with text. A veil of words is pulled over the object, enveloped within language, although sculpture ('sculpts') has, quite literally, the last word. Cutting into the serial repetition of 'CORNELL' instead are verbal or literal equivalents that for Samaras, sum up both Cornell and Cornell's boxes. This, in turn, serves as a model for how to think about Samaras's own small-scale boxes in relation to the problems of describing the visceral, haptic mode of experiencing and 'seeing' sculpture that Samaras proposes. In this homage to Cornell, in which Samaras uses language to invoke touch and a two-dimensional page to suggest a three-dimensional object, a confusion of registers is activated that finds Samaras's working strategy superimposed upon that of Cornell's. Samaras has taken Cornell 'on', as it were, letting his *Cockatoo—Keepsake Parakeet* inhabit his own work, in this instance, a word, not box-homage, to Cornell's own box constructions.

Lawrence Alloway describes the mode of looking that Samaras's boxes engender as that of 'peering', demanding an intimate, almost voyeuristic engagement with the small scale of his 'fundamentally, labyrinthine' boxes that 'forces us to draw close'.<sup>55</sup> Susan Stewart has claimed,

[t]he 'of many worlds in this world' dimension of microscopic, tiny, and miniature objects suggests hiding and uncovering at once, a voyeurism where one might be recognised or caught out – or even, perhaps in punishment for the pleasure of seeing what cannot or should not be seen, blinded.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Alloway, op.cit., p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Stewart and Ralph Rugoff, *At The Threshold of the Visible: Miniscule and Small-Scale Art 1964-1996*, New York, 1996, p. 70.



This adds a libidinised aspect to the intimacy of the spectatorial gaze, a kind of voracity of vision caught up within the desire to know more than can be revealed. In her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993) Stewart explores how we approach and respond to objects of different scale in relation to the attendant implications for subjectivity, addressing issues of mastery and ownership, vision and touch.<sup>57</sup> Referring to Gaston Bachelard's account of the home in his 1964 book *The Poetics of Space*, Stewart broaches the problem of language and description in relation to describing small objects, claiming that it always entails exceeding the limit of what that object may reveal. Bachelard claimed any attempt to describe the miniature in detail involves a 'verboseness of description',<sup>58</sup> which Stewart claims is a matter of multiplying significance, where 'everything is made to 'count''.<sup>59</sup> A proliferation of description and attention can result only in exhaustion, the object itself cannot be described satisfactorily. What occurs is a situation whereby 'significance bursts the bounds of the physical structure'.<sup>60</sup> It is exactly this welter of 'significance', whether it be pins, knives, wool, stuffed birds or beads, that fills the surfaces and centres of Samaras's boxes and which finds its counterpart in his treatment of Cornell in his article 'Cornell Size'.

In a 1976 article for *Artforum*, 'Notes on Small Sculpture', Carter Ratcliff had also addressed the issue of scale, emphasising small sculpture's obsessive, delicately 'precious' quality, rather than its potentially damaging, threatening qualities that demand an intimate, even tactile, encounter. Small sculpture, wrote Ratcliff, is typically understood as connoting luxury, privilege 'and even secrecy',<sup>61</sup> which he likens to Samaras's work, although he attributes Samaras's scale a 'kind of obsessiveness' that 'often holds Lucas Samaras's art to

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London, 1993.

<sup>58</sup> Gaston Bachelard, as quoted in *Ibid*, p. 47.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63.

<sup>61</sup> Carter Ratcliff, 'Notes on Small Sculpture', *Artforum*, April 1976, pp .35-42, p. 35. In this article Ratcliff also discusses the work of H.C. Westermann, specifically his series of 'House' works; small wooden boxes, peopled with objects and people that are visible only when then roof is lifted, or if the window is peered through. For a detailed discussion of H.C. Westermann's work, see chapter three.

smallness',<sup>62</sup> although Samaras is adamant that his work is far from obsessive, rather he contends his small scale and intricate surfaces are about attempting to 'control' not about 'compulsiveness'.<sup>63</sup> Toward the end of the article Ratcliff casts large scale sculpture as 'always implicitly public sculpture',<sup>64</sup> whilst those artists working with small-scale objects 'imply ultimately personal environments, so portable and domestic that even the community we call the art world is sometimes excluded'.<sup>65</sup>

Robert Morris had already published an article on small-scale objects ten years earlier than Ratcliff's *Artforum* piece, in his 'Notes on Sculpture Part One' (1966), drawing a distinction not between public and private but between the different ways in which small and large-scale objects occupy space. Morris' account, unlike Ratcliff's, emphasises the threatening nature of the small-scale object, its encroaching upon its spatial surroundings. Morris argued that, as opposed to large scale 'monumental' sculptures, that demand one respond to them spatially, in relation to one's body size, with small-scale objects, 'space does not exist. [...] The smaller the object the closer one approaches it and, therefore, it has correspondingly less of a spatial field in which to exist for the viewer'.<sup>66</sup> That 'intimate' quality of the small-scale sculpture, claims Morris, 'is essentially closed, spaceless, compressed, and exclusive'.<sup>67</sup> Morris' description is similar to Samaras's own claim one year later that viewing an object close up and drawing it into 'the center of your consciousness', ultimately leaves 'no distance between it and you', giving rise to 'a stifling, suffocating feeling that I am not living in three-dimensional space with plenty of room, but in one which is smack flat two-dimensional'.<sup>68</sup>

In a later essay about small sculpture, Stewart echoed Robert Morris' claims of 'intimacy' for small-scale works and Samaras's more uncomfortable description of space as unbearably constricting, when she wrote 'small objects may bring the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Lucas Samaras, in conversation with the author, New York, April 2001.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Morris, 'Note on Sculpture Part One', [1966] reprinted in Battcock, op.cit., p. 231

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Samaras, 'An Exploratory Dissection of Seeing', op.cit., p. 27.

viewer into a nearly unbearable, unreadable, intimacy'.<sup>69</sup> In *On Longing*, Stewart cites the child's dollhouse, as an example of a miniature object. The dollhouse, Stewart claims, is an example of 'profound interiority', which is 'unrecoverable'.<sup>70</sup> By claiming that interiority is 'unrecoverable' Stewart is mapping out a space of secrecy which she compares to the 'locket', (one of Samaras's words tucked into his word-portrait of Cornell), as a secret trapped and concealed. The dollhouse, Stewart writes, is 'a materialized secret'.<sup>71</sup>

I want to pause now over another homage of sorts, another word-portrait, this time not by Samaras, but artist Mel Bochner, completed one year after Samaras's portrait-homage of Cornell. Part of a series of word-portraits Bochner completed of his artist friends, *Wrap: Portrait of Eva Hesse* (Ill. 1.17) from 1966 spirals a list of words and verbs around one central word, 'wrap'. Bochner scrolls round the spiral, listing 'conceal, wrap up, secrete, cloak, bury, obscure, vanish, ensconce, disguise, camouflage'<sup>72</sup> using a language of secrecy to build up a 'portrait' of Hesse. Just as Samaras had built up a portrait that he claimed described both Cornell and his work, so Bochner's portrait of Hesse reads also as a portrait of her work, that is, an account of the process of concealment and wrapping that she deploys, as well as a portrait describing herself. Although Hesse's often quoted-claim that 'its all so personal...Art and work and art and life are very connected',<sup>73</sup> Anne Wagner has quite rightly pointed out that Hesse's belief in the

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<sup>69</sup> Stewart and Rugoff, op.cit., p. 79.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>72</sup> Lippard, op. cit., p. 204. The full list of words Bochner spirals around are:

WRAP-  
UP.SECRETE.CLOAK.BURY.OBSCURE.VANISH.ENSCONSE.DISGUISE.CONCEAL.  
CAMOUFLAGE.CONFINE.LIMIT.ENTOMB.ENSACK.BAG.CONCEAL.HIDE.  
HEDGE-IN.CIRCUMCINTURE.SKIN.CRUST.ENCIRCLEMENT.CINTURE.RINGED.  
CASING.VENEER.SHELL.HULLL.SHELL.COVER-UP.FACING.BLANKET.  
TAPE.MUMMIFY.COAT.CHINCH.TIE-UP.BIND.INTERLOCK.  
SPLICE.GIRD.GIRT.BELT.BAND.STRAP.LACE.WIRE.CABLE.CHAIN.  
STRING.CORD.ROPE.LACE.TIE.BIND.TIE.TRUSS.LASH.LEASH.  
ENWRAP.COIL.TWINE.INTERTWINE.BUNDLE-UP.  
SHROUD.BANDAGE.SHEATH.SWADDLE,  
ENVELOPE.SURROUND.SWATHE.  
ENWRAP.COVER.WRAP.  
WRAP.

<sup>73</sup> Eva Hesse, as quoted in Cindy Nemser, 'An Interview with Eva Hesse', [1970], reprinted in Armstrong and Marshall eds., *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture*, New York, 1990, p. 196.

unity of her art and life is 'as much a cultural artefact as any other'.<sup>74</sup> It is instead the processes of camouflage, obscurity and burial employed in Hesse's working practice that Bochner's portrait addresses, detailing exactly the language of secrecy and concealment at work in Samaras's boxes.

Words, for Samaras, always fall short of description. One word, he writes, stands for many images, and, unlike those images, they do not have the power to 'grow or constantly transform', they cannot be 'mutilated'.<sup>75</sup> Language and words are instead, 'a crystallization, a corraling, a filing system [...] meaning arises and materializes'<sup>76</sup> slowly, as though fixed, hardened kernels. The processes of wrapping, secreting, concealing and swathing that Bochner spirals around in his portrait of Hesse point also to this process of fixation and crystallisation: the 'swaddling' and 'bandaging' of Hesses' sculpture finds echoes in Samaras's portrait of Cornell's boxes, as 'lockets', that 'inmasks', 'enmists' and 'shrouds' and in his own description of his work in terms of binding or 'banding', specifically in relation to his performative works on film where he would tightly wrap his head in strands of wool, which when removed leave their red marks across his cheeks and forehead. I want to take both Samaras and Bochner at their word here, to think about this fossilisation of language in relation to sculptural practice.

I want to imagine what kind of strategies Samaras and Hesse might be engaged in, specifically in relation to the series of small-scale plaster and papier-mâché boxes they both constructed during the sixties. Returning to the beginning of Samaras's box production and the kernel of his artistic practice, I will trace a kind of origin story, then, of his box. It is in these earliest boxes that the kernel of Samaras's project is most clearly stated, the blockage and resistance of the later boxes, with their attendant temporal delays, removable sections, hidden compartments and concealed areas. These effects find their explicit embodiment in these early plaster boxes that have solidified into impenetrable shells or cocoons.

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<sup>74</sup> Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women) Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O'Keefe*, California, 1998, p. 203.

<sup>75</sup> Samaras, *Dissection of Seeing*, op.cit., p. 26.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Samaras's earliest works were shown at the Reuben Gallery in 1960, where his use of ephemera, rubbish, found, cheap and disposable materials was shared by other Reuben artists such as Allan Kaprow, Robert Whitman, Jim Dine, George Segal and Claes Oldenburg. His work incorporated strips of fabric soaked in plaster and moulded into semi-abstract figurines, small found boxes coated in plaster and wrapped in string, and those sculptural wall pieces with knives and pins stuck to the rough surface that Judd described as 'mental, and sometimes actual, cacti'. Alloway described Samaras's work at this time as 'an exploration of the textures of urban waste',<sup>77</sup> in which he used 'what materials were available'.<sup>78</sup> It is in these early wood and plaster boxes that Samaras first sought to problematise the 'box' as both formal structure and container. In his later boxes, he continued this project, but with a more precise, colourful palette similar to the abstract pastels he was making at the same time. The aggressivity and inaccessibility of his later boxes, with their pin-strewn surfaces, dangerous centres and multi-layered sections are prefigured in these earliest works of Samaras, where issues of inside and outside, access and refusal were first raised.

Samaras was not only constructing boxes at this time. Alongside his various boxes, ranging from pin or yarn-covered reclaimed jewellery boxes to crude wooden ones stuffed with plaster and crêpe-paper, Samaras's activities were varied. From his three dimensional structures, to his pastel works, the Happenings he participated in, his semi-abstract plaster dolls and his 1969 film entitled *Self*,<sup>79</sup> Samaras's work spans the whole range of New York based artistic practice of the sixties. Although one might pursue this issue of diversity, I instead

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<sup>77</sup> Alloway, op.cit., p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. All of the artists associated with the Reuben Gallery at this time were engaged in similar projects, in which urban refuse and ephemera were used in the construction of their objects.

<sup>79</sup> *Self* was made with Kim Levin in Spring 1969, and features the artist carrying out many everyday, yet slightly skewed activities, in a repetitive manner. In one scene, Samaras sits at a table eating a meal that consists of his name in letters, scattered about the plate. Issues of devouring, eating, and the psychically charged elements of such motor functions remains a central feature of many of Samaras's practices. His most recent work, (shown at PaceWildenstein in 2001) showed a series of kitchen cutlery bent and twisted, coated in many thick layers of brightly coloured paint, a kind of visceral, liquid echo of the multi-coloured yarn threads that feature in many of his box constructions. I saw these works whilst still under construction in the artist's apartment, and their multiplicity, as they covered every available surface enacted that spillage, or stuffing of interior to its limit that his boxes also embody.

want to settle on a single moment; Samaras's move from performance-related work at the end of the fifties and early sixties, to the small-scale, object-based boxes he first began to construct in 1960.

This moment of transition finds its formal counterpart in the work of Samaras's friend and fellow student, George Segal. Segal's life-size plaster casts of people carrying out everyday tasks stand as white, ghostly anomalies in their tableaux surroundings, which are filled with the real objects of their environment, a kind of haunting of the Pop world from which they are cast. Samaras actually posed for one of Segal's tableaux, neatly bringing together his interest in the theatre, performance and the body with that of the relative solidity and permanence of plaster sculpture, a form he was to adopt and contract soon after, in the series of small-scale boxes and figurines. Samaras first became involved in the 'Happening' scene whilst studying under the tutelage of artist Allan Kaprow at Rutgers University, New Jersey. Samaras's interest in acting developed during his time at Rutgers, where he participated in a number of performances staged by Claes Oldenburg, as well as many Happenings organised by Kaprow, although he preferred Oldenburg's events ~~than~~ Kaprow's Happenings, which Samaras found 'less organic and dressed up than Oldenburg's'.<sup>80</sup> The Happening had marked a shift in the kind of encounter art could produce, although for Samaras, Kaprow's Happenings were less 'transformative' than Oldenburgs, which were more than simply 'a girl in a leotard and him on a violin'.<sup>81</sup> My interest, then, lies in exploring this move from public performance to the small-scale, intimate containment of a series of small boxes that mark the beginning of a fascination with the box form that continues to preoccupy Samaras today.

Alloway states that the most fruitful way into understanding Samaras's boxes is through examining his earliest pieces, where the 'clues' to the later works are found.<sup>82</sup> He writes that Samaras's 'objects are always metaphors, never attributes

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<sup>80</sup> Lucas Samaras, in conversation with the author, New York, April 2001.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Oldenburg remembers Samaras as a performer who worked 'very slowly, obsessively, calculatedly [...] He developed a certain attitude and a certain set of approaches that I could work around. I knew there were certain things I could do with him'. Oldenburg, as quoted in Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, op.cit., p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> Alloway, op.cit., p. 5.

with fixed meanings,'<sup>83</sup> quoting Samaras's claim that '[t]hings are more than their names'.<sup>84</sup> An archaeology of meaning is sought by Alloway, as he claims that a backward tracking of Samaras's work will recover the buried clues to these boxes, as though access to their 'centre' is somehow embedded within the earlier works; the clue to the later pieces already there and waiting to be discovered. Tracing Samaras's increasingly 'elaborate' process of working, Alloway seems to be implying that Samaras sought to cover over his tracks in order to bury clues in these early structures.

In his early *Paper Bag No.3* (Ill. 1.18), from 196<sup>2</sup>~~0~~, Samaras filled a paper grocery store bag with sheets of scratched mirror pane, alongside several of his pastel works. Kim Levin notes that Samaras only stopped his scratched mirror pieces when he discovered that H.C. Westermann was also making them. During the early sixties Westermann had made a number of wooden boxes that were inlaid with sheets of mirror pane, from which he would scratch away areas in order to create a deep field of reflection and deflection. One of these boxes, *Channel 37* from 1963, was selected to accompany Judd's review of Westermann's 1963 exhibition at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York, one year after Samaras's show at the Green Gallery which Judd had also reviewed, and in which Samaras's *Paper Bag No.3* had also been shown. Although he ceased using scratched panels of mirror glass, Samaras did continue to use shards of mirror in his boxes, as well as small square mirror tiles and reflective aluminium foil. *Paper Bag No.3* is a container of secret contents, there is a 'frustration of information withheld, of the secret of the package—of not quite being able to see the paintings inside' that presents, neatly packaged in this grocery bag, the key to Samaras's project.<sup>85</sup> As well as the issues of concealment I have already mentioned, there is also the notion of portability that Samaras has commented on, claiming 'I liked the transportability of the boxes. I could wrap them up and take them on the bus'.<sup>86</sup>

The use of mirror pane in Samaras work was used to greatest effect in his later mirrored room, *Room No. 2* (Ill. 1.19), 1966, a complex structure which contained

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> Lucas Samaras, as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Levin, Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>86</sup> Lucas Samaras, *Lucas Samaras*, New York, 1972, unpaginated.

a table and chairs, also made from mirrors, creating an effect of eternal mirroring, a kind of contained infinity. This work also featured mirrored spikes on the interior that demand a viewing position fraught with real danger, a large-scale box that enacts the threat of his small-scale work in a far more all-over physical assault. Yayoi Kusama was to also create a mirrored room that same year, and has alleged that Samaras copied hers.<sup>87</sup> However, Samaras had already worked with the idea of the room as container in his 1964 installation at the Green Gallery, *Room No. 1* (Ill. 1.20), although for this room Samaras transplanted his bedroom from his home, complete with bed, light fittings, walls and contents. Bags of yarn, piles of boxes, and the sheer cramming of objects that fill this small interior invoke the room as a large scale box, yet another take on monumental cubic sculpture that retains the formal properties of his small-scale boxes.

Samaras's boxes involve a quest to recover the boxes' secrets or 'clues', which demands the viewer adopt the role not only of the archaeologist, but also of the cryptographer. Kim Levin describes the 'constant competition between concealing and revealing, between hiding and showing, covering and exposing, opening and closing, folding and unfolding, filling and emptying'<sup>88</sup> that plays out across Samaras's boxes. In a 1969 article 'Samaras Bound', Kim Levin quotes Samaras talking about his working process, in which he invokes notions of secrecy and concealment:

It is all extremely ordered, deliberately elusive, deviously haphazard. Everything is hidden; everything is revealed.<sup>89</sup>

A process of concealment is suggested here, but *as* revelation. The veiling, layering and obfuscation involved in his work is a conscious process, employed in order that a secret may eventually be discovered, and suggesting that certain processes and 'rites' must be performed before one may access that centre. It is the edginess of Samaras's interplay of conceal-reveal that rivets our attention in the complex multi-layered and decorated boxes. However partial and fragmented,

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<sup>87</sup> See Laura Hoptman, Akira Tateha and Udo Kultermann, *Yayoi Kusama*, London, 2000, p. 136-37.

<sup>88</sup> Levin, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>89</sup> Kim Levin, 'Samaras Bound', *ARTnews*, vol.67, no. 10, February, 1969, pp. 35-37 and 54 and 56, p. 56.



the careful looking and certain amount of risk to one's body does reward the spectator with access to the various concealed and hidden compartments of these boxes. Whilst 'everything is hidden', touching, opening, turning over and pulling does reveal previously unseen contents.

When Samaras claims 'everything is hidden; everything is revealed', however, he is pointing to another, less accessible aspect of his boxes. What he is suggesting is that, through the layers of concealment and coating, what is demonstrated, or 'revealed' is that *strategy* of concealment. In his earlier plaster boxes, however, the situation is much less balanced. It is not the border between revealing and concealing that these boxes rest on, instead the desire 'to erase, to damage' takes over.<sup>90</sup> Rather than strike an uneasy balance between the two, 'the impulse to conceal usually wins out: effacing is the most extreme form of concealment'.<sup>91</sup>

In his early boxes, rather than simply problematise access, Levin suggests Samaras instead halts the spectator in their tracks. It would seem that the 'irretrievable' is somehow figured through that very process of effacement and erasure. It is in the declaration of secrecy or concealment that the crux of these boxes is located, rather than the display of what that secret centre is. Unable to either open or close, Levin describes these early plaster-encrusted boxes as 'fixed yet potentially explosive containers',<sup>92</sup> or, in the words of Samaras, the point of these boxes is their 'IMPENETRABILITY'.<sup>93</sup>

Rather than trace a simplistic history or lineage for Samaras's boxes, I want to focus on the 'impenetrability' of his plaster boxes, in order to stage an encounter between his work and that of Eva Hesse. Hesse, the same age as Samaras, was involved with the Minimal and, more obviously, Post-minimal or Process art produced during the mid to late sixties. Hesse was delighted when fellow sculptor Paul Thek compared her work with Samaras in 1966, as she was drawn to his

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<sup>90</sup> Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, op.cit., p. 33.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>93</sup> Lucas Samaras 'Statement', in Alloway, op.cit., p. 39.

‘combination of eccentricity, eroticism and humour’.<sup>94</sup> After seeing *Box No.3* on show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York in 1967, one year later, Eva Hesse wrote in her notebooks

1 beautiful Samaras (2 inferior ones)... a box covered with pins. Cover slightly ajar with bird's head forcing its way out from under cover. Old cords and ropes dropping out from front. The piece sits in a plexiglas case.<sup>95</sup>

Hesse is drawn here to the eclectic, busy surfaces and interiors of Samaras's slightly later works, particularly the one 'covered in pins' with the 'old cords and ropes dropping out' from the front. However, it seems that the first set of boxes she was to construct herself in early 1967, *Inside I* (Ill. 1.21) and *Inside II* (Ill. 1.22), were inspired not by the boxes on show at the Whitney, but instead by a less well-known set of untitled boxes Samaras had made in 1960 and 1961, those small, found wooden boxes filled with dried strips of plaster soaked cloth and painted monochrome shades of silver, grey and white, which I will discuss later on in some detail. These early works had first been exhibited in New York in 1960 in the 'New Forms—New Media' show at the Martha Jackson Gallery, and in 1961, in Samaras's first one-man show at the Green Gallery. One was also purchased in 1961 by MoMA for inclusion in their blockbuster show of the same year 'Art of Assemblage', in which works by both Westermann and Lee Bontecou were also included, and which Hesse no doubt would have seen.

Although by 1967 the box was already an established form within Minimalist circles, Hesse identified in Samaras's work a rather less structured, geometric approach. Whilst drawn to the quirky humour and sadistic element of Samaras's pin covered boxes however, Hesse retained elements of the Minimal in several important ways. It was in the fall of 1967 that Hesse employed external fabricators for the first time, sending instructions to Arco Metals in downtown Manhattan for a galvanised steel box that was to become the first piece in her

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<sup>94</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York, 1993, p. 197. The work Hesse was referring to was Samaras's *Box No. 3*. The trailing of cords, that seek to drag the viewers eye down and away from the pedestal has strong formal connections with several of Hesse's own works, for example *Addendum* (1967), and *Laocoon* (1966), which I return to later on in this chapter.

<sup>95</sup> Eva Hesse, as quoted in *Ibid.*

slightly later, more well-known *Accession* (Ill. 1.23) series of boxes. Each version had perforated surfaces punctuated at regular intervals so that Hesse could thread short sections of rubber tubing through the holes to create a spiky interior, as though a bristly or hairy box, a time-consuming practice that took Hesse until January 1968 to finish threading. A second version had to be made the following year in the same material after the first was destroyed by people climbing inside, when it seems the invitation to touch was taken up rather too literally by the spectators.

In 1968 *Accession III*, *IV* and *V* were all fabricated at the Aegis factory, with *Accession III* made from milky white fibreglass and clear sections of rubber tubing, whilst *Accession IV* and *Accession V* were much smaller pieces, standing at a third of the height of *Accession I*. Hesse made five variously-sized boxes in the *Accession* series, ranging from the large-scale ones that rested directly on the floor, reaching the waist height of the viewer, to the much smaller ones that formally bear a similarity to Samaras's boxes such as *Box No.11* (Ill. 1.24) from 1963, a similarity Robert Smithson also picked up on in 1966, when he compared Samaras and Hesses' working strategies.<sup>96</sup>

The trailing strands of yarn and coils of ropes spewing from the middle of Samaras's *Box No.3* find their double in the loosely strewn pile of rope and cords at the bottom of Hesse's *Inside I*, which are repeated again in the trussed-up objects crammed into the centre of her *Inside II*. The chaotic, random way in which the rope, yarn and cords bind, loosen and restrict these works, serves also to link them. Alongside their mutual choice of colour, form and scale in these boxes, what brings Hesse and Samaras's boxes together most interestingly, is the focus each places, or displaces, onto (or into) their boxes' centres. Although in these small, roughly hewn containers both Hesse and Samaras are keen to cover over, or obscure in some way the box's interior, in the case of *Accession* and Samaras's *Box No.3*, they each go about concealing the box structure in different ways. Whilst Samaras covers his exterior surfaces to an almost excessive extent,

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<sup>96</sup> Robert Smithson, 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space', op.cit. I return to Smithson's article later on in this chapter.

the fabrication and structure of *Accession* is clearly visible in Hesse's case, where instead all interest is focused inward, where the rubbery bristles are found.

It is perhaps this difference that Lucy Lippard was referring to when she described the difference between Samaras and Hesse's working strategies. Lippard wrote that, whilst Samaras's work 'is usually focused *in* upon himself, Hesse worked *out* from a body identification into a physical identification with the sculpture itself, as though creating a counterpart of herself and the absurdity of her life'.<sup>97</sup> If Samaras was aware of the process of introspection in his work, then, Lippard is claiming, for Hesse it was an unconscious, almost reparative process aimed toward obtaining greater security and self-awareness. That Lippard considers Samaras's work to be focused 'inside', whilst Hesse's is about exterior identifications only highlights what is at stake in these boxes, that is, issues of interiority, secrecy and concealment, without providing any kind of useful binary distinction through which to think about them.

What Samaras and Hesse share in their deployment and exploration of the box structure is a process of resistance. Both are interested in impenetrability; which for Hesse always had a streak of what she called absurdity or nonsense.<sup>98</sup> Reading 'into' the works—for biographical references, symbolic effects, bodily or psychological empathies—is neither the point nor a possibility.<sup>99</sup> It is the

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<sup>97</sup> Lippard, op.cit., p. 197.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. Lippard cites several occasions in which Hesse pointed to what she considered the absurd quality of her sculptures.

<sup>99</sup> Many writers have sought to retrieve Hesse's biography from her works, for example the early trawling through her diaries by Robert Pincus-Witten shortly after her death, from which he published sections connecting her personal life with the objects she was making at the same time. The previous retrospective of Hesse's work in 1992, before Elizabeth Sussman's recent show in San Francisco, sought to inscribe 'Hesse' within her work in relation to her femininity and life experiences. In particular, Anna Chave's article in the accompanying catalogue posited Hesse as 'wound', referring to her illness, the death of her father and, even, the Nazi concentration camp, in her interpretation of Hesses' work. Other essays in the catalogue shared in Chaves' project. See Helen Cooper, *et al*, *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, New Haven, 1992. The recent catalogue accompanying the 2002 Hesse retrospective redressed the balance. In particular, Briony Fer's paper on the work of salvage in Hesses' work, and the processes of layering she employed have shaped my own account of Hesse's work. See Elisabeth Sussman ed., *Eva Hesse*, San Francisco, 2002. See also, Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women) Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O'Keefe*, California, 1998 which deals explicitly with the problem of biography in relation to the Hesse 'myth' that has developed. Wagner takes writers such as Anna Chave to task for creating readings that read Hesse's biography 'into' her work. Mignon Nixon's work on Hesse that proposes the idea of the irruptive Kleinian part-object in post-war sculpture also serves as counter to those 'essentialist' accounts of Hesses' work that track biological, or biographical

‘nothing to say’ aspect of their works that surfaces from beneath the welter of material, and where the apparently symbolic elements fall short. Articulating ‘nothing’, a structure, or system of secrecy, is the point of these boxes.

Samaras’s *Untitled (small box)* (Ill. 1.25) from 1960 is a small wooden box, measuring just over ten inches from the base to the tip of the fixed-open lid. This crudely-constructed box is stuffed with strips of plaster-soaked crêpe paper mixed with feathers. The only manipulation of the paper is where the barely distinguishable features of a face emerge from a formless terrain, with a top layer of paper forming the vertical stripe that functions both as a ‘nose’ and as a dividing line suggesting eye sockets. The use of abstracted bodily reference is a hangover from the series of plaster figurines Samaras was moulding at this time, where the suggestion of figural reference is so slight it only just staves off the suggestion of total abstraction. It is not the exterior of the box, that is, its external shape, that Samaras has concealed with the plaster, but the centre, which has been stuffed with plaster-soaked cloth that seems almost too much for the box to hold. Again, the contents threaten to spill out and over down the sides of the wooden box, as an inside only just contained, at the limit of its boundary of ‘interior’, forcing us to rethink what a ‘box’ is when its usual role as container is reversed.

The feathers caught up and petrified in the unctuous plaster mass evokes uncomfortable sensations of a burst pillow, or sleep ruptured; the thought of dreaming upon such an object is utterly abject. Although hardened into a solid mass, the centre of this box appears to be soft, as though it will yield to touch, a malleable stuffing of crêpe-paper strips. Alongside these more psychically-charged invocations of petrification remains, then, an oblique allusion to the anthropomorphic, inserting this box right back into the rhetoric of sixties sculpture that it seemingly seeks to avoid. For, as critic Max Kozloff pointed out in 1967, ‘one thing sculpture is quite simply not allowed to be, if it has any pretensions to the mainstream, or any claim to historical necessity, is soft’.<sup>100</sup> Kozloff explains that the defining feature that has traditionally confirmed that sculpture is

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connections to her work and working strategies in her ‘Posing the Phallus,’ *October*, no. 92, Spring 2000, pp. 99-127.

<sup>100</sup> Max Kozloff, ‘The Poetics of Softness’, *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, California, 1967, p. 26.

‘sculpture’ and not something else, is its hardness and refusal to yield. That which is ‘soft’ or in some way elastic maintains an element of the body, an abstract anthropomorphism that looms over the work of art, undoing its status as ‘sculpture’.

In *Untitled* (Ill. 1.26) from 1960, we see that the plaster has not been used as the method by which the artist achieves a mode of representation, whether mimetic or abstract, that is, as intermediary device, the usual process from which form is moulded, or cast, but has instead been allowed to ‘take over’. It has not been sculpted or cast, but simply applied, roughly distributed as a mass of ‘stuff’, of barely-contained ‘content’. The edges and joins of the strips of paper are clearly visible in the finished box, lending it the appearance of a mummified form.

Hesse’s *Inside I* is a small open box covered in layers of papier-mâché that also leave a surface punctuated with traces of the artist’s hand; rough patches of random pressure and application that the dried paper retains. The bodily trace here, however, emphasises the materiality of the papier-mâché, rather than the contours and presence of Hesse’s hand. At the very bottom of the box lies that ball of tangled wires, or threads that rest, as though in an exhausted pile in the dark interior of the box. *Inside II*, the smaller box, contains two odd, misshapen forms, wrapped in cords and threads that have been painted over, reminiscent of the small rock that Samaras displays in his studio, that has been ‘banded’ in wool and string until the rock is concealed and only the layers of wrapped string and wool on show.<sup>101</sup>

The titles Hesse gives these boxes refer one literally to the interior space of the work, that ‘inside’ she is so keen to draw one’s attention to, located at those points of opacity, or ambivalence in terms of what one may come to know or find out about those insides, due to their being covered with paint, wrapped in cord, or

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<sup>101</sup> The small work space that Samaras’s has in his apartment is filled to the limits with bottles of beads, jars or glass fragments and balls of wool alongside his painting materials and work bench strewn with tools and oddments. This wrapped object on his shelf stands out as an object clearly not useful to the making of other works; it is not a tool or container, but rather a curious thing that sits in the shelf as though talisman or reminder. Samaras acknowledged that this object in many ways embodies many of his sculptural concerns. In conversation with the author, New York, April 2001.

coated in paper. Samaras's engagement with the interiority of the box involves refusing the spectator access to the insides of his plaster boxes through an abundance of 'filling', similar to those large objects in *Inside II*. He has filled and covered over the insides of his boxes to such an exaggerated state that they threaten to overflow and devour them, to spill over into the realm of 'exterior'.

Wrapping, covering over, bandaging, hiding and concealing are actual processes that both Samaras and Hesse employed in their strategies of resistance in these boxes, that find their analogue in the viewing conditions they each stage. In each of Hesse's works, the issue of concealment is dealt with in different ways. In *Inside I* the box is not filled with the painted wires, rather, they are discovered at the bottom of the box, lurking in the darkness as if they have collapsed to the floor, fallen from a previously vertical and taut position to one of a confused and obscure tangle in the inside of the box. With *Inside II*, the paper, paint and cord-wrapped objects fill the box to a much greater extent, as though the desire to cover over, or fill has intensified since *Inside I*. Their lumpy indistinguishable forms are like the rough bulges frozen in the process of spilling out of control from the centre of Samaras's *Untitled (small box)* and *Untitled*.

Discussing his interest in layering and wrapping in a 1984 interview, which took place in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Samaras chose the Egyptian part of the museum as his favourite spot. When asked what he thought of the display cabinets and shelves that fill the room, of the fact that '[e]verywhere we turn there are cases within cases within cases'?<sup>102</sup> Samaras replies that they are 'a metaphor for everything in a way [...] Nothing is unprotected. Layering is a part of life'.<sup>103</sup> It is the mummies that Samaras is keen to visit, claiming '[t]here's a magnificent mummy somewhere around here. The wrapping is absolutely fantastic [...] It's almost as if they were peeling apart, revealing different layers'.<sup>104</sup> He is drawn to the mummies that have been given sculpted faces, or 'masks', as '[m]asking is always an important thing'.<sup>105</sup> What is interesting about this interview is the way

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<sup>102</sup> Douglas Blau, 'Shiftings: Things Beside Himself', *Lucas Samaras: Chairs, Heads, Panoramas*, New York, 1984, p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

that Samaras insistently returns to the mummies and those processes of wrapping and masking over that have been carried out in order to protect the concealed bodies inside. Rather than think about the 'face' Samaras included in the plaster box from 1960 as complicating that process of abstract, amorphous moulding, as a kind of left-over trace of his earlier more figurative work, it may be cast instead in terms of its being 'mask-like', that is, as one more wrapping, one more fold or layer applied in the process of concealment.

This invocation of the mummy suggests a return to an archaic past, both establishing a prehistory for Samaras's work and an archaeological language for thinking about his work: Samaras casts himself as artist-archaeologist here. The working procedure of the archaeologist, of recovery and revealing, that Alloway suggested as a 'fruitful' way into Samaras's work is, however, inverted through Samaras's process, frustrated at every stage by the wrapping, plastering over and burial of content that his works enact. The prehistory of his boxes has been cut off, his procedure of layering and camouflage suggesting an anxious delaying of the moment of stripping bare, or discovery.

The same year that Hesse made *Inside I* and *Inside II*, Robert Smithson commented on her work's 'vertiginous and wonderfully dismal'<sup>106</sup> nature. In his article 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space', published in the November issue of *Arts Magazine*, Smithson clustered together the art of Hesse alongside Samaras, claiming that their work shares a 'condition of time that originates inside isolated objects rather than outside'.<sup>107</sup> The work of Hesse's that he illustrates the piece with is *Laocoon* (Ill. 1.27), the wire and plastic trellis piece coated in papier-mâché and cloth-covered wire. Samaras's 1963 *Box No.11* is also depicted, that box covered in swirls and coils of coloured yarn, stuck to the exterior in a continuous surface of tightly coiled whorls of wool and bristling all over with hundreds of shiny pins, pushed into the sides and lid.

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<sup>106</sup> Robert Smithson, op.cit., p. 34.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



Smithson described Hesse's *Laocoon* as 'mummified', with 'wires that extend from tightly wrapped frameworks' creating a general effect of 'dereliction'.<sup>108</sup> The coils of papier-mâché covered wires wrap around the structure, and 'some are cracked open, only to reveal an empty center'.<sup>109</sup> What interests me about Smithson's article is not so much that he brackets Samaras and Hesse together, but rather the language he employs in describing both *Laocoon* and Samaras's boxes. Smithson wrote that Samaras 'made 'models' of tombs and monuments',<sup>110</sup> invoking a sense of those objects' position as 'static', tomb-like and 'detemporalized'.<sup>111</sup> Although Smithson reproduces one of Samaras's jewel and pin boxes to illustrate his point, I would suggest that the impulse to entomb or to encrypt is played out far more decisively in his earlier plaster boxes.

It is this sense of the objects representing a 'waning of space' that I am translating here to a language of silence and secrecy. This, for Smithson signals a deathly encroachment upon these objects' spatial boundaries, what Samaras described as 'suffocating'<sup>112</sup> and Morris, in his writing on small sculpture, as 'spaceless' and 'compressed'.<sup>113</sup> As though crypts, or mausoleums of space, the exclusivity of these objects, as intimate and timeless is bound up with the suggestion that the space has not simply 'waned', but has been wrenched from them, by the wires, ropes, cords and hardened plaster that entomb them. It is this shared aspect of their work, rather than Smithson's sense of a dystopian vision, that Hesse draws from Samaras's boxes.

As early as 1954, Samaras had been drawing boxes. In his *Untitled* (Ill. 1.28) sketch the box Samaras has depicted is not rigid, nor is it a detailed jewel-encrusted object. What Samaras explores and subverts instead in this sketch is the underlying structure of the box. The box appears to be under some kind of external pressure, as though it has been 'warped' by the space around it. The same year Samaras made this sketch, and others like it, with lids that don't fit, and squashed, half-crumpled sides, Diane Waldman wrote in *Art News* about the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>112</sup> Samaras, 'Dissection of Seeing', op.cit., p. 27.

<sup>113</sup> Battcock, op.cit., p. 231.

'thinness of space' that his boxes 'reinforce'.<sup>114</sup> Walden is describing the surface effects generated by Samaras's pin, yarn and razor strewn surfaces in which there is 'little concern', she writes, for the 'box as a structure which occupies real, i.e. measurable space.'<sup>115</sup> Walden is trying to pick up on what she considers the 'two-dimensional' aspect that Samaras's surfaces offer, unlike Cornell's retention of the conditions and formal strictures of the box's structure.

In 1967 and 1968, Hesse also produced a number of two-dimensional images of boxes. Two works entitled *Accession* (Ill. 1.29 and Ill. 1.30) are sketchy, close-up details of the inside corners of boxes, although the lines are not straight, nor the perspective quite true. Neither Samaras nor Hesse's drawings of boxes could be described as working drawings, or even preparatory sketches; rather they seem to be probing the structural form of the box, squashing, sketching, flattening out and focusing in on its linear contours. Hesse's drawings tend to be exhibited alongside her *Accession* series of boxes, which, as we have seen were, unlike her small hand-moulded *Inside I* and *II*, larger, pre-fabricated metal structures, pierced with hundreds of uniform holes through which Hesse threaded short lengths of rubber tubing. In a way, the *Accession* boxes are the logical conclusion of Samaras's pins for Hesse, made, as they were, the same year that she saw his boxes at the Whitney, and just after she made *Inside I* and *Inside II*.

Although these smaller, slightly earlier boxes *Inside I* and *Inside II* tend to be treated as 'test pieces' rather than fully-fledged works in their own right, I suggest that these two boxes function in a similar way to Samaras's early plaster boxes, as initial explorations into the box as viable container and artistic form. They are not simply test pieces—roughly constructed, unsuccessful models, or practice runs with materials—but instead demonstrate a literal working through of those formal issues, of inside and out, access and refusal, touch and vision, that the box engenders. Neither Hesse nor Samaras's 'warped boxes' resemble their contemporaneous working practice. Instead, in both Hesse and Samaras's

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<sup>114</sup> Diane Waldman, 'Samaras: Reliquaries for St. Sade', *Art News*, vol. 65, October 1966, pp. 44-46 and 72-75, p. 75.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

drawings, the 'box' is pared down and only its structure, not its decoration, is addressed.

Although many sculptors make drawings after a work's realisation in three-dimensions in order to work through still unresolved issues of the final piece, or sometimes as a record of work done, in Hesse's case, these drawings of boxes are clearly designed to fulfil a need other than the working out or resolution of a formal problem. Their skewed perspective and crumpled, deflated sides are a far cry from the bristly-busy surfaces of *Accession* and the fixed, moulded sides of *Inside I* and *II*. What her close-up depictions of crooked corners and skewed perspectival sketches demonstrate is that the box is a far from fixed category for Hesse, and that, within the confines of its precise geometry, there is room for confusion and a loosening of its strictures. Scott Rothkopf describes Hesse's drawings in terms of their negotiation of the anxieties attached to the rigid angularity of the cubic (for which read 'Minimalist') structure, writing that her 'distorted perspective and line warp her otherwise nearly perfect construction'.<sup>116</sup> Rothkopf suggests a wilful reconfiguration of the geometric which, enacted through, or on the site of the box itself, points to what 'troubled' Hesse most about these boxes; that she didn't want her final work to be 'too right'. Hesse did not want the box form to be so fixed and controlled, but to complicate what we thought we knew about the box by radically altering or 'warping' our perspective on it.<sup>117</sup>

The sides of Samaras's warped box fold in upon themselves, as though caving in under the pressure from that outside space Smithson describes in temporal terms as 'static', as though space were being sucked away. The pressures under which the box is put finds echoes in other areas of Samaras's practice. In some instances, he ensnares viewers through visual tricks, using mirrors so that insides become outsides. For example, in *Box No.4* (Ill. 1.31) from 1963, two side panels open to reveal that their underside has been covered with fragments of mirror pane that refuse to reflect anything in its entirety, throwing back only a cut-up, displaced series of partial reflections. Disrupting our sense of place and 'self'

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<sup>116</sup> Scott Rothkopf, 'Accession', in *Eva Hesse*, (2002), op.cit., p. 214.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

through this slicing up of our image, the shards of mirror serve also to displace the box's own unity and centre, opening up and outward, revealing its interior not as interface between inside and out, but as deflecting screen of fragmentation and disruption, that throws its interior *out*, away from the box into the exterior space the panels open or 'cut' into.

In 1966, one year later, another page from Samaras's sketch book shows a number of drafted box forms and permutations on various cubic structures (Ill. 1.32). These minute sketches fill the page, dotted about in a random fashion. Featuring boxes with lids open, closed cubes, diamond-shaped containers, L-shaped forms and slabs, precedents for many of his working practices are found here, sometimes with sketched-in hatching to emphasise three-dimensionality, with others no more than a single black outline. Beneath one sketch Samaras has written in tiny block capitals OPEN BOX, at another point on the page he has drawn a brain, with one long hypodermic syringe piercing into the centre of it. The repeated image of the needle in Samaras's work, from its earliest appearances as the straightened-out safety pin sticking out from *Untitled*, to the many needles he placed inside boxes and the hundreds of sharp pins he pierced his surfaces with, seems fairly typically figured here. This is simply an example of Samaras doodling one of his favourite motifs, a gonzo-style cartoon image that, nevertheless, expresses explicitly the effect of Samaras's works in three-dimensions that I have been exploring in this chapter: a violent, sharp incision into the viewer's physical and psychic encounter with his boxes.

Working in three-dimensions, Hesse and Samaras sought to 'camouflage' the surfaces of their respective boxes, which they each achieved through very different means. For Hesse, it was the interior space itself that she drew attention to, leaving the external surfaces bare, as it were, with the 'workings' on show. In the case of *Accession* as well as *Inside I* and *II*, this involved a filling-up of the centre. Hesse blocked access from the inside out, whereas Samaras sought to either confuse the spectator by complicating exactly *where* that centre is in the first place or halt them in their tracks from the outset. When Lippard pointed to the difference between Samaras's focus on the external and Hesses's on the internal aspects of sculpture, she was establishing a rather sharper difference

between the two than I want to sustain. At the core of each of their engagements with the box is a desire to stage an uncomfortable, even impossible, encounter with the box's interior or 'middle'. Rather than Lippard's model of interiority and exteriority as implicated with a set of bodily empathies and identifications, it is the different *means* through which they each mobilised a tactic of 'encryption' that marks Samara's and Hesse's boxes apart.

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In this chapter I have tracked the lineage of Samaras's complex, elaborately decorated and filled boxes to their point of origin in 1960, when Samaras constructed his first box. These secret boxes, or 'tombs', as Smithson described them, find their correlate in the psychoanalytic writings of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, whose work focuses on issues of silence and secrecy, cryptonymy and haunting. For Abraham and Torok, the secret is an inherited trauma or family secret unwittingly inherited by the subject. This could be anything, an unspoken family trauma, a crime that has been committed, or a shameful secret, that has never come to light. This secret event, situation or drama is passed down or inherited, in silence as an 'undigested' item held within the subject's mental topography as an unmarked tomb of inaccessible knowledge. This secret becomes locked inside the unconscious as a resistant kernel, closed off from everything else, what Abraham and Torok call a 'crypt' and Stewart called, in another context, 'unrecoverable'.<sup>118</sup> Wrapped in silence, the unspeakable secret encrypted within the subject forms a blockage, a blank space in the psychic apparatus identifiable only through those gaps, omissions, breaks, discontinuities and ruptures in the subject's speech and behaviour.

This notion of the 'unrecoverable' was raised by Samaras in an interview with Kim Levin, where he stated 'when I say art is an attempt to recapture the past I mean art is an attempt to recapture lost beauties, lost excitement, things that you lost in a lifetime'.<sup>119</sup> An attempt, Samaras implies, that is doomed always to fail. Samaras has claimed that 'it is good to look back' to the past, as, by searching in

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<sup>118</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, op.cit., p. 103.

<sup>119</sup> Samaras, as quoted in Levin, 'Samaras Bound', op cit., p. 56.

the origins of past work and attempting to recover that past and 'see what you did', he seeks 'confirmation' that he 'hadn't committed a crime'.<sup>120</sup> How does one go about recapturing that which is already lost? Consigned to silence, to an absence, those memories, moments and experiences Samaras tries to recall are beyond retrieval, locked away in an inaccessible realm that he admits is not available, 'they are just in your mind'.<sup>121</sup> Samaras is invoking a notion of the artist as archaeologist, or detective, someone who sets out to recover, reveal and bring to light that which is buried or secreted, a role that finds its double in the work of the spectator who, when 'peering' into the box seeks also to retrieve its secret or meaning.

In their joint paper 'The Topography of Reality: Sketching a Metapsychology of Secrets' (1971), Abraham and Torok outline a methodological approach structured around the twin poles of secrecy and silence in relation to the way in which subjects unwittingly bury or house traumas and family secrets within their unconscious. The structure of secrecy through which Abraham and Torok develop their model of subjectivity goes some way to describing the strategies of secrecy and concealment outlined in this chapter. Wrapped in silence, yet bursting from their containment, Samaras's boxes operate as a though a secret on the brink of articulation. Just as the subject unconsciously surrounds their speech with obfuscation and shifting identifications in order to stave off the painful resurgence of the secret, so Samaras wrapped, piled, layered and impacted the secret centres of these plaster and rag boxes.

In Samaras's case, his seemingly contradictory aim to uncover lost experiences and moments, to perform the task of an archaeologist recovering past memories, whilst simultaneously engaging with the processes of wrapping and binding that clearly fascinate him in relation to the mummified bodies, may be reconfigured in terms of that process of obfuscation of meaning that conceals the encrypted secret. The process of covering and binding that serves to obscure the object itself is echoed in the artist's writings, where the process of recovery often surfaces. When discussing his use and choices of medium Samaras recognised that

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<sup>120</sup> Lucas Samaras, in conversation with the author, New York, April 2001.

<sup>121</sup> Samaras, as quoted in Levin, 'Samaras Bound', *op.cit.*, p. 56.

‘[m]etaphoric meaning could not be totally expunged from anything because psyche-loaded qualities transposed themselves in all visible things’.<sup>122</sup> However hard he tried, ‘meaning’ could not be totally eradicated from his work, although what that meaning *is* remains elusive and inaccessible.

The roughly textured, hard surface of Samaras’s plaster and Hesse’s papier-mâché boxes and their concealed, or heavily wrapped, guarded content function as secrets, or protective shells; like the wing case of a beetle, the walls of a castle, or a sealed tomb within a crypt. Oscillating between protection and prevention, access and refusal, these shell-like barriers stand as guardians of those secrets that lie concealed within the box, both in terms of the form itself being covered over and buried beneath a welter of layers of wet plaster or paper, and the wrapped or hidden objects themselves that reside within.

I am interested in the move from these plaster boxes to the elaborately structured, intricately worked surfaces and interiors of the later boxes. Just as the Minimal structure retained the strict ‘look’ of the Minimal for barely a few years before loosening its strictures and developing outside of its rigidly bare and geometric form, so these early boxes also enact that strategy of resistance just at the point before which they had to yield. The constricting form of the plaster works only just stave off that spillage, as it takes only a drop of water, or a heavy handed thump to crack the shell of *Untitled* and *Untitled (small box)*, a fragility it is hard to recognise in photographs of the boxes. Between the hardened crypts of the early plaster boxes and the later, complex boxes that open and partially accede access, the boxes of Samaras enact a process of archaeology, a kind of ‘auto-homage’ in which his later boxes refer back to those earlier, impenetrable works, in order to establish a route out of, or away from them. With his earliest, wood and plaster boxes Samaras returned to the crudest origins of the box, which he immediately set about filling up with stuff. Just as the plaster and rag dolls he was making at the same time only just retained the impression of the human form, so these boxes too, sought to eclipse their structural origins, with so many added layers and plastered-over surfaces.

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<sup>122</sup> Samaras, ‘On Materials’, op. cit.

These plaster boxes function as what Stewart called ‘materialized secrets’—they signify that a strategy of making secret has taken place. Operating as encrypted objects that obstinately refuse to give themselves away, the secrecy of these plaster boxes works in two ways. Occupying a position of secrecy in Samaras’s own oeuvre, in which the elaborate, detailed, decorated boxes are most often discussed, at the same time they articulate that schema of secrecy so crucial to his work, in which cryptic suggestion, fragmented biography, historical reference and symbolic inference are so heavily alluded to, yet so deftly deflected. Samaras’s later, more complex constructions could only have been realised after these plaster works. The shifting poles of access and refusal, effacement and plenitude that the jewelled and decorated boxes present function as attempts at redemption; a reparative strategy of retrieval that can only be worked through after the fact of the initial processes of burial and concealment. The success of that reparative process can, of course, only ever be partial, but the fact that the later ‘decorative’ boxes clearly intend to ‘mean’ in some way, marks a place for them within a symbolic register that the early plaster boxes only teeter on the brink of.

Typically understood as cryptic in terms of what they are supposed to mean, as symbolic, surreal objects containing mysterious erotic, biographical, historical, even religious secrets, I instead posit Samaras’s ‘materialized secrets’ as literally ‘that’, i.e., material embodiments of ‘secrecy’, not instances of a particular ‘secret’. What is articulated is a thematics of secrecy. This resistance demands an encounter at once compelling and detached, the box, seemingly replete with ‘stuff’ and meaning is instead a kind of crypt. Its concealed interior is rendered as though a blank space or hole in the viewing encounter that cannot be ‘filled’ by meaning or words, but can only be recognised as such.

As I have described, it is a thematic of secrecy, not an iconography of secrets that can be identified as running through Samaras’s boxes. Addressing this situation directly, Laura Mulvey commented on the secret in relation to the motif of the box. Borrowing a phrase from Bachelard, Mulvey describes the ‘space of secrecy’ in terms of its organisation around the binary oppositions of inside and out. Mulvey discusses this in relation to the myth of Pandora’s box, specifically



those paintings and literary accounts of the myth that all focus on the details of the appearance of the box, such as its jewelled and patterned surfaces. Mulvey points out that it is not the details and description of the iconography of the box itself that is important, but the fact of the unspeakable contents that it contains, which artists have not chosen to represent in their depictions. She describes the abundance of surface decoration often attributed to the box's 'beautiful carapace' as 'an exquisite mask' that seeks to prevent inquiry by deflecting interest away from its centre in the same way Samaras's boxes both entice and threaten.<sup>123</sup> Mulvey describes Pandora's box as 'invested with extra attributes of visibility' that, however 'eyecatching' and 'shining', remains vulnerable: 'It threatens to crack, hinting that through the cracks might seep whatever the 'stuff' might be that it is supposed to conceal and hold in check.'<sup>124</sup>

By tracking Samaras's later boxes back to their origins, we see that the processes by which he constructs his boxes, the rapid application of handfuls of glue-soaked beads to the surfaces, the clutches of tangled yarn stuffed into the centre and the repeated piercing, pricking and stabbing of the glistening sharp pins into the structure, mirror that desire to complicate access to the secret centre which Mulvey describes as the drama of Pandora's box. It is exactly this strategy which Abraham and Torok discovered to be the situation of the secret crypt housed within the subject. The hard, impenetrable surface and content that merge into one amorphous blockage in *Untitled* and *Untitled (small box)* stand as physical embodiments of that crypt. Just as the psychic crypt functions as a 'sealed-off psychic place, a crypt in the ego [that is] comparable to the formation of a cocoon around the chrysalis'<sup>125</sup> so Samaras's containers also function on a register of what he called 'impenetrability'.

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<sup>123</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity', in *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Indiana, 1996, p. 62.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Abraham and Torok, 'The Lost Object-Me': Notes on Endocryptic Identification', [1975] Ibid., p. 141.

Just as Judd kept *Box No.48* next to his bed, a seemingly alien object in the context of his Minimal world, so Samaras too keeps his early plaster works stored in his own bedroom where they are encased in glass. However, Samaras's boxes provide just one more layer to his already over-stuffed, environment, with its small workspace filled to the ceiling with balls of twine, jars of beads, strands of coloured glass, tins of pins and other odds and ends that eventually find themselves entrenched within one of Samaras's laden surfaces and interiors. Although providing a jarring intrusion in the Minimal space of Judd's apartment, Samaras's boxes appear less volatile in the context of the artist's own home. They serve instead to envelop and encase it, yet one more repetition of the box, as though a miniaturised double of the room.

One more layer in an already overloaded interior, they only add to and envelop, not incise and violate the space of his environment, a model of encryption that also goes some way to articulating the position of Samaras's boxes within the wider range of contemporary sculptural practice during the sixties. This is apparent not only in terms of these boxes engagement with issues of containment and wrapping but also in the way that Samaras himself has since become concealed within histories of his moment. This is not simply that Samaras's work suggests he might be the disruptive 'unspoken secret' or 'phantom' that haunts Hesse's early engagement with the small-scale box, but that within sculptural histories of the period, the subsequent elision of certain artists such as Samaras signals an element of anxiety within the wider context of ways in which those histories have been constructed and main players designated. This strategy of 'hiding' is best explained in terms of Abraham and Torok's model of subjectivity, in which the subject is locked in an internal conflict that seeks to bypass the traumatic secret harboured in their unconscious by a process of encryption and secrecy, which finds its sculptural analogue in the wrapped objects and crammed-full or concealed surfaces and interior spaces of both Samaras's and Hesse's small-scale boxes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Topographies of the Void, or Lee Bontecou's Unspecified Objects

Lee Bontecou made her first wall-mounted reliefs, such as *Untitled* (Ill. 2.1) between 1958 and 1959. Her earliest reliefs were small square pieces, usually with one cavity located just off-centre, leaning away from the frame at an oblique angle. The works were made by welding together a series of flat steel rods to form a skeletal structure that builds up toward a central cavity of varying depth. The steel armature is then covered with a skin of fabric sections, fixed to each other and the structure via a method of patchwork, although instead of cotton thread the fabric swatches are punctured through and adhered to the steel armature with short twists of copper and steel wire. At this time, Bontecou was the only woman artist represented by Leo Castelli, and for a while she was one of his most successful artists, showing in Paris in 1965 at the Ileana Sonnabend gallery as well as receiving several solo exhibitions in Germany and Holland.<sup>1</sup>

In Bontecou's *Untitled* (Ill. 2.2) from 1958-59, the crater almost fills the frame, with the black void threatening to engulf the entire surface of the work. Referring to her repeated deployment of the black hole, in relation to both her early series of soot-covered boxes and her later reliefs, Bontecou said 'I like space that never stops. [...] Black is like that. Holes and boxes mean secrets and shelter'.<sup>2</sup> Like Samaras's boxes, Bontecou's work also posits something 'secret' hidden at its core, and, although working on a much larger scale than Samaras, the void in Bontecou's reliefs also demands a mode of looking that is dependent on the spectator's proximity in a way that consistently disturbs both his or her position and expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> Bontecou's first solo exhibition was at Gallery G, New York in 1959, only one year after returning from Rome where she had been working on a Fulbright scholarship after graduating from the Arts Students League in 1956. She had solo exhibitions at Leo Castelli, in 1960, 1962, 1966 and 1971. In 1964 she was included in the 'Documenta 3' show in Kassel, Germany. In 1965 she had a show at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in Paris, and in 1968 she had large solo exhibitions at the Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam and at the Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, Germany. In 1972 she showed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, at the Davidson Art Center, Connecticut in 1975 and in 1977 a retrospective was held at Skidmore College, New York. Bontecou has also exhibited in many group exhibitions.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Bontecou, as quoted in the entry on Bontecou in *World Artists 1950-1980*, Claude Marks ed., New York, 1984.

For Bontecou '[g]etting the black opened everything up. It was like dealing with the outer limits'.<sup>3</sup> In her works, Bontecou sought materially to represent the void or 'hole' that each of her reliefs is structured around in a way that posits the void as both the centre of the work and as a secret unavailable space. It is the limits of that void, and how the space or absence it articulates disturbs the boundaries of both the viewing subject and the object itself, whether violently, sexually, or psychically, that is the focus of this chapter.

Prior to Bontecou's move into her better-known large-scale constructions, she had made a series of soot drawings in which sheets of paper would be coated with a thick field of velvet-black soot (Ill. 2.3). It was the imagery of these early works on paper, specifically the ways in which she could utilise 'black', that Bontecou experimented with in a group of small boxes she constructed between 1958-1959, now kept in the artist's own collection (Ill. 2.4). These welded frames are approximately four inches high, incorporating stretched pieces of muslin, leather or canvas that covered the surface with a material membrane blackened with soot. In order to produce these effects she used an acetylene welding torch in which the oxygen had been turned down to its lowest setting. Bontecou described these works in terms of their being 'like a landscape sort of thing.'<sup>4</sup>

Bontecou would typically suspend tiny hanging spheres inside these boxes, only just visible to the eye, as though miniature 'landscapes' caged within their confines. At other times, she would incorporate single slits into the surfaces of the boxes, cutting through the fabric covering to reveal the black interior, inviting touch and handling in a way that was to become much more threatening in the later, large pieces. In a number of surprising pieces from this time, Bontecou made some large, floor-standing works, as though enlarged versions of the small boxes, for example, *Untitled* (Ill. 2.5). Another of these works, *Untitled* (Ill. 2.6), is supported on thin stick-like stands resembling an old-fashioned camera, or

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<sup>3</sup> Lee Bontecou, as quoted in Mona Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou's "Warnings"', *Art Journal*, Winter, 1994, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 56-61, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Lee Bontecou, in Tony Towle, 'Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou', *Print Collector's Newsletter*, May-June 1971, vol.II, no. 2, , pp. 25-28, p. 26.

series of cages. With its sizeable clunky composition and the large scale of the boxes involved, this untitled work points to a direction Bontecou's work possibly could have taken, toward large, floor-bound pieces and the serial repetition of the box structure. Actually, she moved in a very different direction, flattening out the black box form and raising it to the wall. Working with the relief, yet retaining the suggestion of its having an interior space, or centre, allowed Bontecou to work with the implications of the three-dimensional box, whilst expanding its form and permutations in a relief format. Whilst, in his 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 1', from 1966, Robert Morris's objection to the wall relief stemmed from his problem with the 'limitation of the number of possible views the wall imposes', for Bontecou, this 'imposing' status of her wall-mounted pieces, controlling how the viewer encounters them, became the central concern of her large, signature wall-mounted reliefs.<sup>5</sup>

It was whilst experimenting with these small-scale boxes that Bontecou realised the direction she wanted her work to take. Up until then she had been working on semi-abstract cast sculptures of chunky, fantastic-looking birds, which she began whilst on a Fulbright scholarship in Rome. Living in a terracotta factory in Italy she would cast sections of terracotta, drying them out over welded structures which she then cemented back together. The recurring thematic of covering over, use of black voids and interest in various materials for her surface coverings struck Bontecou later on once she began to create the large-scale pieces, where she discovered that 'the strange thing is that even after you have changed, as you believe you have, and then look back, you see there is one thread through it all'.<sup>6</sup> Explaining her move into large-scale structures from the small boxes she began to make on her return to New York, Bontecou says: 'I welded a frame and realised I could hold everything together inside it. So I got to work. And the pieces opened

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 1' [1966], in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 4 Morris' full quote reads: 'The autonomous and literal nature of sculpture demands that it have its own, equally literal space—not a surface shared with painting. Further more, an object hung on the wall does not confront gravity; it timidly resists it...One more objection to the relief is the limitation of the number of possible views the wall the imposes'.

<sup>6</sup> Bontecou, as quoted in Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, New York, 1979, p. 378.

up onto the wall. It was a nice freeing point. The pieces got larger and larger'.<sup>7</sup> The welded structure became a controlling device, so that the void could be contained within its larger frame in a way that the early soot-black small boxes could not. By opening up the framework, Bontecou could work through the tension of the void's presence, allowing it to anchor the work to the wall, rather than allow it to 'take-over' the entire surface. In these boxes the void or 'blackness' of the work instead envelops the entire work, in a way that could almost be described in retrospect as embodiments of that void; what, in relation to Samaras's boxes, I called 'materialized secrets'.

From the single cavity pieces, Bontecou moved onto more complex structures; larger works that incorporated metal skins of welded together strips of steel and aluminium as well as the tough fabric coverings. Later on she began to use moulded sections of fibreglass and epoxy panels, shot through with iridescent colours, from tawny oranges to burnt russets and opaque creams. In this chapter I take as my focus those works incorporating recycled, dirty fabrics stitched together in roughly hewn swatches, using reclaimed wires, bandsaw teeth, fabrics, grommets and metal grilles; the materials that, as we shall see, most overtly articulate the phantasy of aggression that these objects give rise to. Just as Mignon Nixon has described the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois in relation to a Kleinian model of pre-Oedipal drives, in Bontecou's work also 'the sculpture comes into being as the object of aggressive fantasy—as something to bite or to cut, to incorporate or to destroy'.<sup>8</sup>

*Untitled* (Ill. 2.7) from 1966 is a large relief hung in the lobby of the New School for Social Research in New York. It is a welded armature with sections of burlap attached to it, of various hues of browny-orange, that are water-stained and, in places, beginning to tear slightly, as the fabric is losing its elasticity and beginning to come away from the framework. From its centre juts a large, metre-wide cavity, which protrudes from the structure at a slightly oblique angle. A series of photographs taken from a few paces in front of the work, and from both the left

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

<sup>8</sup> See Mignon Nixon, 'Bad Enough Mother', *October*, no.71, Winter 1995, pp. 71-92, p. 75.

and right hand sides of it (Ill. 2.8 and Ill. 2.9), show that, although covered over with pieces of the fabric, the metal framework of the object is still clearly visible.

The apparently polychrome, painterly surfaces of Bontecou's patchwork reliefs which, at first glance are suggestive of cubist paintings, or abstracted fields of washed-out ambers and reds, are revealed, upon closer examination, to be mere illusion.<sup>9</sup> With the removal of distance between the object and viewing subject comes the realisation that what one is looking at is not, as it appears from a distance, a two-dimensional painting, its patchwork segments reading as painted sections of a flat canvas. The promise of Modernist abstract composition is revealed as a deception. Loss of distance between the object and the viewer reveals a rather more viscerally imposing encounter than when viewing the objects from further away. Encountering *Untitled* close-up clearly reveals a rusty, torn, damaged, stained, taught, matt, dirty surface. In most reproductions the twists of wire adhering the patchwork membrane to the structure are barely visible, and the depth of the void Bontecou built up with the welded armature that disrupts the flat surface, is virtually impossible to make out. Bontecou's desire to 'go for miles into the surface'<sup>10</sup> is revealed only when viewing the work obliquely, either intimately close or askance.

The twists of wire and frayed edges of the stained and dirty fabric of *Untitled* (1966) seem to suggest what is on show is in fact the rear view of the object, revealing the rather messy, dirty and supposedly hidden-from-view aspect of the piece, as though a kind of 'exoskeletal' structure. 'Exoskeletal' was Donald Judd's term for describing the spatial effects of Minimalist Dan Flavin's light pieces, a term which, used in relation to Bontecou's reliefs, involves less a delineation of space drawn in light, than a complication of its boundaries, welded in metal. Bontecou's 'exoskeletal' framework instead invokes the more fixed, solid armature of an object, or living thing when displayed on the outside. This is a rather more uncomfortable description, implying a turning inside-out that is

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<sup>9</sup> It is Elizabeth Smith who draws attention to the formal similarity between Bontecou's surfaces and synthetic cubism in her article 'Abstract Sinister', *Art in America*, no.9, September 1993, pp. 82-87.

<sup>10</sup> Bontecou, as quoted in Mona Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou—Heart of a Conquering Darkness', *Source :Notes in the History of Art*, vol. XII, no. 1., Fall 1992, pp. 38-44, p. 41.

more violent, almost splayed out.<sup>11</sup> What renders these objects of Bontecou's unnerving in this close examination of the surface is the membrane covering that envelops the structure. Its own ambiguity of surface, that is, of it being inside or outside, complicates the way that we read the structure. Unlike Samaras's 'hundreds of surfaces', Bontecou, like Judd, one of her earliest supporters, had only 'a few', which she worked with, virtually exclusively, throughout the sixties. Just as the inclusion of hidden panels, moveable sections and multi-levelled compartments in Samaras's boxes involved a strategy of displacement and confusion of centre and edge, inside and out, so Bontecou's works also seem to switch between the registers of inside and outside, this time articulating a more unsettling confusion of protective shell and peeled-away 'skin'.

The central void becomes a cavity that may be full or empty, either turned inside-out so that that which was contained is spilled, or full, retaining the position it occupies as internal and contained. There is a sense, then, that we are looking at something that we should not. The joins, fixtures, processes and materials that go into constructing the work have been forced out into the viewer's space. This can be seen in a close-up detail of the work. What we expect is a seamless smooth object, whose workings and processes of construction remain unseen and unknown. To reveal the underside of the work invokes an uncomfortable sense that we are seeing the work as somehow in reverse. With its roughly finished edges, stained and patchy surface and jutting-out central cavity, comes the attendant expectation, or phantasy, that there is an alternative view of the work, a view that is more acceptable, that is, of a seamlessly finished, surface.

From the single cavity pieces, Bontecou increased the number of openings in her work, punctuating the surface with several orifices which were occasionally covered over with a welded metal grille, or overhung with metal shells that resemble a series of blind, masked faces, or prison-like windows. Whatever

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<sup>11</sup> Judd wrote that Flavin's work allows the interior space of the gallery to be 'articulated by light' that delineated not so much the structure of the work, but of the work's 'interior', that is, they mark out not so much the space of the room as the space of the work as it fills and lights the room, making what Judd describes as 'an interior exoskeleton' rather than an 'interior structure'. Donald Judd, 'Aspects of Flavin's Work', 1969, reprinted in *Donald Judd: The Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax and New York, 1975, pp. 199-200.



permutation on the skeletal structure, the one unchanging aspect was always the black hole or void. All works were backed with sheets of black felt or velvet that served the dual purpose of covering over the process of construction that would otherwise be revealed at the back of the work, as well as forming the 'black void' that is visible when the openings are peered into.

The materials Bontecou used were recycled, dirty and reclaimed. She used old fire hoses, discoloured laundry bags, postal sacks and stained sheets of burlap, alongside the more solid casings of old sections of aircraft and other found objects, like the sections of dryers she scavenged from the Chinese laundry below her studio. Occasionally, Bontecou would use denim, abstractly invoking a bodily metaphor, as in the work *Untitled* (Ill. 2.10) from 1962, where the already-present seams and stitching of the cut-up jeans are echoed in the joins and seams of the pieces of fabric themselves. The use of the denim fabric presents a curious conflation of everyday clothing with the rather more unsettling skin-like carapace this stretched, stitched surface evokes. However, instead of the delicate sewing of cotton thread used to stitch clothing, the fabric swatches are punctured through and adhered to the steel armature with short twists of copper and steel wire, as seen in an image of Bontecou at work (Ill. 2.11), where she is twisting the sharp pieces of wire to the welded skeletal framework prior to piercing and fixing the fabric membrane to it.

Trawling Canal Street, 'my favorite shopping place,'<sup>12</sup> for the remainders of New York City's junk and piecing them together to form large, composite three-dimensional sculptures was not, of course, Bontecou's invention. She has often been grouped together with those 'assemblage' artists of the fifties and sixties, such as Robert Rauschenberg, and John Chamberlain, as well as with Samaras and H.C. Westermann, whose own strategy of assemblage I discuss as 'bricolage' in the next chapter.<sup>13</sup> William Seitz's 'Art of Assemblage' show at MoMA in 1961

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<sup>12</sup> Private correspondence with the author, letter dated June 2002. Bontecou wrote 'Canal St. was heaven—old surplus & hardware stores—plastic rubber, metal etc., all is gone now—the old generic commercial world has moved in. It was my favorite shopping place as well as for other artists at the time'.

<sup>13</sup> Chamberlain was working in New York at the beginning of the sixties, before moving to California. John Coplans, in an article reviewing the work of Bontecou, Chamberlain, Edward

had attempted to map the terrain of the new 'assemblage' object, defining it broadly as any object constructed either entirely or in part from 'preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects or fragments not intended as art materials'.<sup>14</sup> 'Art of Assemblage' was an ambitiously scaled show spanning twentieth-century Cubism through to contemporary practices on both the East and West coasts of America.

Both Rauschenberg and Chamberlain were included in 'Art of Assemblage', as were Samaras's *Untitled* from 1960-61, one of his early plaster boxes, discussed in chapter one, and Westermann's *About a Black Magic Marker* wooden slot-machine/*personnage* from 1959-60. Bontecou's *Untitled* (Ill. 2.12) from 1960, was selected for the show, a large scale multi-faceted structure with cavities that contract inward as well as jutting out from its patchwork fabric surface. Bontecou's work is pictured in the catalogue, a full-page black and white reproduction that is juxtaposed next to a full-page colour image of John Chamberlain's crushed and colourful automobile-part 'assemblage', *Essex* (Ill. 2.13), from the same year. In the catalogue, Seitz cites 'juxtaposition' as the dominant mode of construction shared by assemblage art, although the show was too ungainly and wide-ranging in its claims to retain any real force or specificity

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Higgins, Kenneth Price and, interestingly, H.C. Westermann, claimed that Chamberlain's move from retaining the found colour of the automobiles he crushed, to painting selected areas in colours of his own choice marked his move from the New York assemblage model of the found object to surfaces that were 'brighter and cleaner', containing, Coplans writes 'more of the ambience of California'. John Coplans, 'Higgins, Price, Chamberlain, Bontecou, Westermann', *Artforum*, no.2., vol. 10, April 1964, pp. 38-49. What Coplans outlines in this article is the recent 'younger and newer' generation of artists who owe more to the abstract-expressionists than they do the older generation of American sculptors. Although the painterly comparison sits awkwardly with the wooden sculptures, ragged fabric assemblages and welded steel work of these artists, what Coplans is attempting is a dislocation of their work from that of David Smith etc., what he describes as 'this rupture of sculpture as monument', toward the portable, unique, with its 'sharper focus in the optic—a new scale of interplay between the haptic and the optic'.(p. 39). Coplans describes Bontecou's wall reliefs as 'a dead-end image that she can only repeat, elaborate, decorate and endlessly re-explore' (p. 40). Rather than simply dismissing Bontecou's 'limited' range, Coplans seems to be suggesting this project of constant reiteration as part of that shift toward anti-monumentality and large scale statements of progressive change in sculptural practice embodied in the work of, for example, David Smith.

<sup>14</sup> William C. Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, New York, 1961, p. 4. Although problematic in its range of artists and definition of a new 'assemblage' aesthetic, the show did exert considerable influence at the time. For an account of the show and its main claims, see *Studies in Modern Art 2: Essays on Assemblage*, New York, 1992, particularly Roger Shattuck's 'Introduction: How Collage Became Assemblage' and 'Transcript of the Symposium', an edited version of the 1961 symposium accompanying the show. Panellists included Lawrence Alloway, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Huelsenbeck, Robert Rauschenberg, Roger Shattuck and William C. Seitz.

in defining 'assemblage', which remained a term roundly rejected by virtually all contemporary artists included in the show, including Bontecou, who has since claimed 'I have no connection to assemblage—that was stuck on by the gallery'.<sup>15</sup>

'Art of Assemblage' had its original inception on the West coast, as the idea of Peter Selz, who was later to curate the 'Funk Art' show in San Francisco, at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, in 1967.<sup>16</sup> 'Art of Assemblage' had its origins ten years earlier for Selz who, on his arrival at MoMA, New York in 1958, already had the idea for a show 'Collage and the Object'. Seitz, then curator of MoMA, had apparently been thinking along similar lines, and it was his, rather than Selz's assemblage show that eventually came to fruition. The two curators disagreed over what Seitz felt were the painterly associations of 'collage,' although what was ultimately lost in the move from Selz to Seitz's curation was the West coast assemblage or 'funk' scene that was so prevalent in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, and which Selz had been keen to incorporate. Bontecou's work, in particular, has striking similarities with two such artists, Bruce Conner and Harold Paris, Californian-based sculptors whose constructions of darkly sinister objects also deployed tattered, dirty fabrics and everyday items.<sup>17</sup>

Conner's nylon webs are stretched over wooden panels, ensnaring feathers, marbles, doll's heads, shoes, and pieces of fur. The surface is rendered at times thickly layered or webbed, densely laden with sinister part-objects, at others

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<sup>15</sup> Bontecou, private correspondence with author, June 2002. There seems to be some antagonism between Castelli and his artists at this time over the labelling and marketing of their work. Castelli is said to have been keen to ensure that the name 'assemblage' be always associated with Leo Castelli artists.

<sup>16</sup> Selz did co-curate 'Art of Assemblage' in New York. The show travelled to San Francisco in 1962, between March and April, having been at the Dallas Museum of Contemporary Art between January and February 1962. The show included only seven West-coast based artists among its 252 exhibits. Those artists were: Bruce Conner, George Herms, Jess, Ed Kienholz, John Baxter, Bruce Beasley and Seymour Locks. In retrospect, notable exclusions to the show are Californian artists Clay Spohn and Wallace Berman. Selz's 1967 'Funk Art' show at the University Museum, Berkeley included Bruce Conner, George Herms and Wallace Berman as 'precursors' of Funk, along with Joan Brown, Robert Hudson, Harold Paris, Peter Voulkos, William T. Wiley, Manuel Neri, and Kenneth Price. See *Lost and Found: Four Decades of Assemblage Art*, California, 1988, for a detailed survey of West coast sculptural practice during the fifties and sixties.

<sup>17</sup> The importance of West coast based sculptural, or object-based production demands further research, which, although occasionally touched on in my thesis in relation to artists' such as William T. Wiley and sometime L.A based H.C Westermann, exceeds the remit of my current project.

sparse and bare, the paint-streaked or untreated wooden panel board showing through, at once reinforcing and destabilising the spatial effects of the work. Other works of Conner's are more explicit, such as the dolls that are tightly bound in nylon cords which tie the mummified figure to a kitchen stool or chair. An example of this is his 1959-60 assemblage *The Child* (Ill. 2.14), which features a wax figure bound in webbed stretches of nylon and cloth, strapped to a baby's high chair, captured by the nylon that suffocates, strangles and arrests whatever is caught up in its snare.

Although far removed from the ephemeral nature of Conner's materials, Harold Paris's *Elder* (Ill. 2.15) from 1960 shares Conner's staging of violent or macabre situations. *Elder* is a bronze cast of a chair represented part-way through the process of its being devoured or rotting away; the seat of the chair lurches up, tearing out of its fixtures and rupturing away from the frame as though warped by heat; the entire chair appears to be putrefying before our very eyes. Proposing at least an enigmatic fragment of narrative, the work of Paris and Conner exemplifies what Lucy Lippard described as an 'aesthetics of nastiness', a kind of dirty pop that shares much with Samaras's own series works using chairs, which he covered over in a similar fashion to his yarn and pin strewn boxes, adding and removing legs and backs, rendering them if not impossible, then dangerous to sit on and use.<sup>18</sup> These objects engage with aggressivity, explicit in the work of Paris and Conner, as well as Ed Kienholz's unnerving tableaux, and implicit in the work of Bontecou, where it finds its abstract equivalent.

For both Conner and Paris, the violence inflicted or implied, is less threatening. The object may unfold, melt, rot, or it may be bound, strangulated, trapped or tortured. The language of violence and decay, the suggestion of a rotting chair somehow devouring itself, and the way in which the doll's body is reduced to an amorphous bulge, reveal a darker side to the assemblage constructions of, say Rauschenberg or even Chamberlain. Although often using objects that have been

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<sup>18</sup> See Lucy Lippard, 'Eccentric Abstraction', *Art International*, vol. 10, no.9, November 1966, pp. 28-40. Interestingly, the work of Lucas Samaras has also been compared with the work of Conner. Chapter one of this thesis touches on this point in relation to the recent Pop art show in Paris, where Conner and Samaras were exhibited in the same section of the show as examples of a the 'darker', more phantasmatic dimension of Pop art.

attacked or somehow violently reconfigured, the object of attack in a Chamberlain work, for example, that has been crushed, compressed, crunched and overpowered, typically comprises automobile parts, rather than more disturbing, personal artefacts such as the doll's head, bedding and household furniture of Conner and Paris.<sup>19</sup>

The object under attack in Paris and Conners' work is more personally affective. Soliciting an intimate engagement with the spectator, we are invited to witness the scene before us—decapitated baby dolls, bodily protuberances—squishy, sexualised and aggressively seeking our participation. Although the void in Bontecou's work invites viewers to read 'into' its vacant space, its appearance does not 'figure' violence in the literal way that Conner's bound dolls or Kienholz's figures do, but rather evokes its immanent possibility. The threat of Bontecou's work is always implicit. It relies not on aggressive imagery, or sickening scenarios, but an activation of the space between both the object and the subject looking at it; an activated object that threatens the space of the spectator as well as the space of the object itself.

Occasionally, Bontecou's surfaces are more explicitly aggressive. One rather unusual piece from 1966, *Untitled* (Ill. 2.16), in the Guggenheim Museum, New York seems to articulate a more overtly aggressive surface than other pieces. This is a multi-cavities piece in which the holes retain a strikingly 'facial', or at least 'masked' quality not present in other works. The cavities have been half covered over with a shell-like carapace, as though masks or beaks sheltering the hole (Ill. 2.17). This work is surprising in the tonal range of the surface. Made from strips of welded steel that have been fixed together horizontally, the piece is tonally much lighter than other works, as it has been painted dirty white, with blown soot stuck to its surface in places. Instead of a patchwork membrane stretched over and fixed to a steel armature, this work is comprised of an aluminium surface, creating one single hard façade to the work, a solid wall that is both structure and

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<sup>19</sup> Other artists such as Lindsey Decker and Jackie Windsor also engage with this kind of 'dirty pop', or the 'aesthetics of nastiness' that the works of Conner and Paris exude, on both abstract and more figurative levels, both in terms of their choice of materials and processes of working, for example Windsor's tightly bandaged pieces and Decker's moulded part-objects. See Lippard, *Ibid.*

surface.<sup>20</sup> The shell-carapaces have been painted black—not, however, the deep velvet-black of her earlier works on paper and her small boxes, but a scratchy, patchy black that lends this predominantly white piece of work a kind of fifties sci-fi appearance, now jaded and worn and quaintly comical. The sharp bandsaw teeth that are placed within the small carapaces are grotesque. The teeth are placed slightly apart, not clenched uniformly together. For all its sinister appearance in terms of scale and material, this work remains almost comical, a point that would not have been missed by Bontecou, whose works on paper are also shot through with a sinister sense of humour, featuring clamped teeth and carvinalesque gaping mouths.

The Guggenheim piece is over six feet tall, although, due to its bilateral extension at the sides into a kind of bottom-heavy cross, it loses some of the intimacy of the single-cavity framed works, particularly those where the void is not barred but barren. It was at this time that Bontecou began experimenting with different, more contemporary materials, most notably moulded sections of coloured fibreglass and epoxy which she would combine with other found materials, for example the section of an old World War II bomber plane she incorporated into her work *1964* (Ill. 2.18), hung in the lobby of the Lincoln Center, New York. Ranging from orangey-brown to russet-yellow, the central cavity of this totemic work is flanked by two smaller ones each side. Unlike her welded armature pieces, this work, like the Guggenheim piece, is not set within a rectangular or square frame. Bontecou's free-standing or large wall constructions cast from fibreglass, epoxy or strips of metal function rather differently to the other reliefs. They are much more of their time than, say, the burlap and welded steel works. It is the fibreglass pieces in particular, the lightly toned works that radiate light from within, that seem so fragile. These pieces are too pretty, too light of touch, and

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<sup>20</sup> Roberta Smith, in her review of Bontecou's 1994 show held at the Parrish Art Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, also commented on this work's surprising appearance, which stands in stark distinction from her earlier, dark, monochromatic works. She wrote, 'The elaborate, mostly white construction that culminates the show will surprise almost everyone, even though the piece belongs to the Guggenheim. It has been on view for a total of six months since it entered the collection in 1975', 'Haunting Works from the 60's', *New York Times*, Sunday October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1993, p. 42. The 'surprise' of this piece was no doubt partly engendered by the Guggenheim's decision to rarely exhibit this large work in its galleries displaying the Guggenheim's permanent collection. It is currently held in storage and had not been unpacked since its return from this show in 1994 until I saw it in 2000.

contemporary in their monumentality and simplicity (in relation to her other works) to fit with the more awkward, dark and roughly hewn pieces.

One problem with the loss of the frame from these objects is the accompanying loss of tension from the work. Unlike Bontecou's early black boxes that also seemed to eschew the frame for an all-over evocation of the void itself, the fibreglass and brighter panelled pieces that incorporate the void do not establish a point of tension between surface and hole but seem to neatly accommodate it. The loss of that tension is increased by the number of cavities that have been covered over in the Guggenheim piece. It refuses the possibility of an encounter with the void, its vulnerability and penetrative space is protected. By both barring and then masking the series of holes, access to the work is heavily restricted. Unlike the works that invite closer, intimate (and intimidating) viewing conditions, this work seems to actively deflect our gaze. It is a defensive object that too literally plays out the strategy of aggressivity that finds its more psychically charged articulation in other cavity, or unmasked works.

Another large mixed-media work featuring fibreglass is *Untitled* (Ill. 2.19), from 1966, which is owned by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and fairly glistens in the harsh strip lighting of its storage facilities. At turns opaque and dark, or shot through with a lightness that is almost palpable, the undulating surface of the work is a far cry from the taught, matt patchwork surface of, for example *Untitled* (Ill. 2.20) from 1960. Although engaged in the same strategy of projection, these cast section works do not possess the same intimate, unsettling charge as the burlap, hessian and sacking-swathed armature pieces that I have been discussing so far. The single protruding void in this smaller *Untitled* piece articulates a more visceral, immediate confrontation with the void than works such as the Chicago piece that, even close up, with the joins, seams and trickle of paint still evident, retains a level of luminescence and beauty that works such as *Untitled*, with its dark, jutting void, and weighty, dank surface covering absolutely do not.

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Just as a comparison with Hesse's and Samaras's drawings in chapter one demonstrated a shared interest in probing the structural problems and implications of the box form, so Bontecou also worked through, in two dimensions, the implications of her own sculpture, specifically ways in which she could reconfigure the void and the absence it embodies. Turning to Bontecou's works on paper, we see an interesting dialogue between the overtly figurative and 'violent' or aggressive, and the three-dimensional abstract pieces. What is so curious about these works, however, is that, whilst figurative and therefore explicit in their depictions of mouths, eyes and weapons, they do not simply find their abstracted correlates in the three-dimensional pieces. Rather, operating on a more literal register, the depiction of gas masks, guns, chomping jaws and gaping mouths makes the drawings less violent. The frightening aspect of Bontecou's wall-mounted works is not inherent 'within' the objects themselves, they do not stand alone as emblems of terror, or sinister scenarios. The sense of foreboding, fear and violence Bontecou's objects so frequently elicit, arise from that psychically charged encounter *between* the object and the spectator.

Often Bontecou's works on paper are finished works in their own right, rather than preparatory pieces, for example the series of lithographic prints she made at Tatyana Grossman's Universal Limited Art Editions from 1962.<sup>21</sup> It was lithography that marked Bontecou's move into print production as a distinct area of her working practice.<sup>22</sup> Whether lithographs, soot on linen, pencil or charcoal on paper, there is a high level of figuration in Bontecou's two-dimensional work, particularly in light of the resolute abstraction of her objects. Amongst the abstract black concentric prints and quasi-fantastic 'worldscapes', there are a number of intricate paper works that depict gas masks, teeth, mouths and eyes. How does the translation from the explicitly violent, aggressive drawings to the violently charged, eroticised large welded fabric constructions manifest that shift from mere sinister appearance to viscerally disturbing encounter?

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<sup>21</sup> Bontecou has said 'I draw for pleasure and think of them [her works on paper] as work drawings as well as drawings in themselves'. Private correspondence with the author, op.cit.

<sup>22</sup> When asked what drew her to lithography, Bontecou described it as marking the break between her working drawings and finished works on paper. She said, 'Then [1962] I was just making working drawings, not final drawings....You can make revisions on the stone'. Towle, op.cit., p. 25.



*Untitled (aviator)* (Ill. 2.21), 1961, is a graphite on paper work that features at its centre a strange object somewhere between humanoid face, gas mask, and internal organ. Bontecou has conflated a bodily register with the dehumanised image of a gas mask, a left-over remnant of World War II, persisting now as a chillingly pertinent signifier of warfare, of danger and potential attack. Bontecou's inclusion of machinery and pieces of armoury left over from the Second World War occurred several times in both her sculpture and drawings. Her mother had worked, during the war, in a factory making submarine parts, and it was this interest in the bits and pieces of warfare, the used, exhausted or now-defunct aspect of old planes and weapons that Bontecou picked up on. Her anger at the situation in Korea resulted in a series of small welded 'prison' reliefs and sketches (Ill. 2.22) that figured the striations of prison uniforms and an early use of the barred and grill-covered cavities she was to deploy in her later works, in which images of warfare and imprisonment found their large-scale reconfiguration in the scenes of entrapment she later went on to construct.

In *Untitled (aviator)* the form of the gas mask has been complicated by the addition of a series of ventricle-like tubes that protrude from it. The eye holes are clearly distinguishable, as is the mouth, with the mesh-like air vent enabling safe inhalation of oxygen here taking on the double illusion of both figurative mouth and concentric void. Just to the left of the main image is a miniature version of the mask, this time even more distinct, with only two tubular forms attached, depicted in a more refined outline emphasising that this is a drawing of an actual object, with the mouth hole clearly indicated through its being much darker and tightly delineated, as are the two eye sockets. The blanked-out blind eyes of the mask, from which veiny tubes stick out, read as eerily inert bodily correlates to the vacant voids of her three-dimensional pieces, uncannily evoking fragile, fleshy internal bodily organs at the same time as they signal armour and protective carapace. This hostile, frightening image of warfare is permeated with a sense of foreboding violence as well as unmistakably invoking for the spectator the internal topography of the human body. This hostility was keenly felt by the artist herself who, when asked about the subjects she depicted in her drawings, described their continued presence as something she could not shake off, claiming

'I can't seem to get away from them. But I keep running!'<sup>23</sup> Bontecou is keen to escape the explicit motifs of warfare, and its attendant paraphernalia, as though unwelcome ghosts that threaten her abstract compositions.

Two works from 1964, entitled *Designs for Sculpture* (Ill. 2.23), (graphite on paper), and *Untitled* (Ill. 2.24), (graphite and soot on linen) are more heavily worked drawings that link closely with her sculptural practice, although at the same time they retain a high level of figuration that is markedly absent from her objects. The latter work features two shapes, placed one above the other, the top shape is oval, the lower one rectangular. They are placed over a graduated background of horizontal stripes of grey and white in variegated graphite and soot. In the top oval shape is a set of teeth, clenched together in a curving line from one side of the oval to the other. No other facial features are figured, although the suggestion of lips is clear. The rest of the shape is filled with the grey-black of the pencil and soot. It is the handling of the graphite outline that makes the comparison of this row of small white squares to a set of teeth so compelling. A softness of form, a slight rounding at the edges of each square, and the suggestion of lips and mouth-like form that they adopt renders such an anthropomorphic reading irresistible. The lower shape is instead filled with one of Bontecou's trademark black voids, which rests above another oval form, both of which sit upon a stripy ground of grey strips that echoes that of the image as a whole. Formally the stripes and small circular holes resemble her later welded iron structure from 1966 *Untitled*, the white-surfaced Guggenheim piece.

*Designs for Sculpture* renders that suggestion of teeth even more explicit. A much more linear pencil drawing than *Untitled* from 1961, it features a series of interlocking ovoid shapes. Inside each shape is a mouth, usually with bared teeth clenched together in a comic-grotesque grimace, whilst in others, the lips are tightly clamped shut, with the contour of the line marking them out as lips varying from curved downwards, to upwards, to slightly off-centre, suggesting a variety of facial expressions: frowning, smiling, grimacing. The central, largest shape is the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 25. Bontecou is referring to the drawings she began making in the later fifties and early sixties, which she returned to and continued to make after she moved into three dimensional objects.

clearest example of this, with the half-open mouth and the row of sharp, spiky teeth that would suggest a non-human mouth, mid-bite, or yawn. The element of comedy is clear in this as in other of her works featuring teeth imagery, but that they are a figurative, recognisable representation is indisputable, and it is this that interests me.

In 1968, Bontecou had a solo exhibition at the Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, Germany. In the accompanying catalogue was reproduced a lithograph of a large eye which filled the frontispiece (Ill. 2.25). The thick black lines that Bontecou used are in stark comparison to the use of light washes, or the soft, smudgy surfaces of her other drawings and series of 'Stone' lithographs. The eye and eyeball are crudely demarcated, as is the eye lid. It is an uncompromising, bold image that seems to stare back at the viewer, a powerful introduction to a series of predominately large-scale sculptural objects that the exhibition included. The point I want to make is that the use of figuration that Bontecou incorporates in her prints and drawings, of masks, faces, mouths, eyes and teeth, is reconfigured, not simply replaced, by a language of abstraction in her object-based works. Describing the way her drawings switch from being works in their own right to being connected to the sculptures, Bontecou said 'I also use them to work out problem's [sic] in a piece of sculpture. It's a fast fix at times. I never do a piece of sculpture from a drawing—at best sometimes back and forth—both very loose'.<sup>24</sup>

Bontecou's abstracted sculptural language allows her to point both to that actual object (it is an eye, it is a mouth), and *beyond it*; from the specificity of the literal, bodily eye, then, to the phantasy of the eye as sexual organ.<sup>25</sup> Between the

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<sup>24</sup> Bontecou, in private correspondence with the author, June 2002.

<sup>25</sup> It is interesting to note, in connection with Bontecou's move from figuratively depicted violence and to abstracted aggressivity in her three-dimensional works a small sculpture of a gun she made in 1959. Bontecou's gun, made just after the early set of small boxes, is made up of washers, bullets, found objects. Bontecou playfully describes it as an 'out of this world gun', (Bontecou, as quoted in Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou—Heart of a Conquering Darkness', op.cit., p. 41) which, although pointing to her occasional works in which she directly treats social or political concerns (for example, in a 1961 drawing of a gas mask, the reference to its being a piece of armour is emphasised through the inclusion of the letters 'U.S.A' on the front, and the 1966 drawing entitled 'America', which figures abstracted emblems of warfare and violence) remains an oddly inert, unthreatening piece, it clearly does not 'work', and the piece seems rather redundant, as though a toy, or makeshift prop.

specificity of the prints and drawings and the large-scale objects, a shift in perception, in ways of looking and seeing occurs. Just as Samaras's boxes demand that they be viewed in partial fragments by a method of 'peering', and H.C. Westermann's objects, as we shall see, require a type of looking that is more akin to the physical act of 'drifting', so Bontecou's objects demand also a specific type of attention. The mode of looking that Bontecou's work sets up moves from 'ordinary looking' to a sexualised, libidinal gaze, imbued with psychic phantasies. It moves from the specificity of the eye as phenomenal object to the psychic logic of the part-object.<sup>26</sup> Rather than here cast the aggressive female body in terms of a phantasy of castration, or those readings of the void in Bontecou's work as *vagina dentata*, it is the void *at the point of* activation, as staring socket or vacant, hollow, activated orifice and black absence, that lures the viewer and mobilises the encounter between the object and the viewer that I want to pursue.

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In her statement for MoMA's 'Americans 1963' show, Bontecou wrote 'I'm afraid I am rather vague about expressing philosophies of art and especially about my own work.[...] The individual is welcome to see and feel in them what he wishes in terms of himself'.<sup>27</sup> Her own call for an openness of interpretation contrasts with the ways in which her work, since the sixties, has been seem to privilege the feminine and sexual difference. For example, feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, have claimed that Bontecou's 'feminine imagery'<sup>28</sup> was influential on her own practice, although, echoing the ambivalence of Eva Hesse toward such readings, Bontecou has since written that 'as far as women's imagery it was not

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<sup>26</sup> What is interesting is that both Donald Judd's article on Bontecou's sculpture in 1964, which I discuss in some detail later, and the Städtisches Museum catalogue that opens with the print of the eye, feature, as frontispieces, examples of Bontecou's lesser-known two-dimensional work, rather than her sculptures. (Judd's opening image is a photograph of Bontecou in the studio of Universal Limited Art Editions, surrounded by her series of lithographs).

<sup>27</sup> Lee Bontecou, as quoted in Dorothy C. Miller ed., *Americans '63*, New York, 1963, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Judy Chicago talking to Lucy R. Lippard', *Artforum* vol. 13., no. 7, September 1974, pp. 60-65, p. 64. The full response to Lippard's question 'What about your emphasis on [...] "female imagery", which was wildly controversial, to put it mildly?' was 'I meant that some of us [women artists] had made art dealing with our sexual experiences as women. I looked at O'Keefe and Bontecou and Hepworth and I don't care what anybody says, I identified with that work. I knew from my own work what those women were doing'.

my intension [sic] nor female aggression...I feel art is not male or female'.<sup>29</sup> In 1965, Annette Michelson wrote in the catalogue for Bontecou's solo show at the Ileana Sonnabend gallery in Paris that Bontecou's art 'is neither feminine nor feminist; in its scale, its manner of reconciling contradictions, it achieves that essentially androgynous character which distinguishes the art of her time'.<sup>30</sup> Michelson's demand that Bontecou's objects be understood as fundamentally 'androgynous' was not adopted quite so readily back in New York. Many writers have focused on the sexual nature of the orifice-like void in Bontecou's work, the so-called 'vaginal' imagery her work embodies. This is due in part, certainly, to Bontecou's role as a woman artist, however, such language is also, I think, tied very much to its time. Although Michelson's claim that current work is defined by its androgynous nature is, to an extent true, the lack of visible women's practice being discussed seriously in art magazines at the time renders her point rather mute. Once critics realised that the name 'Lee' belonged to a woman, accounts of her work as situated somewhere in the uneasy space between eroticism, violence, and the body, specifically, the female body, became a common feature in writing on her work.

The work of Eva Hesse has also often been described in terms of the body, as though sexual objects, absurdly inflated, elongated, multiplied and bandaged penises and breasts. Just as resolutely abstract as the reliefs of Bontecou, the work of Hesse has only in recent years been rehabilitated within a discourse not intent on reading 'woman', the body, or, specifically 'Hesse' as somehow inscribed within the work.<sup>31</sup> Hesse was interested in Bontecou's work, and, after visiting Bontecou in her studio in 1963, noted in her diary,

I am amazed at what that woman can do. Actually the work involved is what impressed me so. The artistic result I have seen and know. This was the unveiling to me of what can be done, what I must learn, and what there is to do. The

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<sup>29</sup> Lee Bontecou, private correspondence with the author, op.cit.

<sup>30</sup> 'cet art n'est ni feminine, ni feministe; par son échelle, par sa façon de concilier les contradictions, il atteint à ce caractère essentiellement androgyne qui est celui de l'art de son temps'. Annette Michelson, *Lee Bontecou*, Paris, April, 1965, unpaginated

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women) Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O'Keefe*, California, 1998 and chapter one, footnote 98 of this thesis for a brief outline of recent scholarship on Hesse.

complexity of her structures, what is involved, absolutely  
floored me.<sup>32</sup>

Although it was the complexity of Bontecou's sculptural practice that initially impressed Hesse, no doubt inspired by the fact that Bontecou was a slightly older, established woman artist at this time, it was ultimately Bontecou's engagement with the void that prompted Hesse to produce an untitled drawing 'homage' (Ill. 2.26) to Bontecou in April 1961, as part of the ninety ink drawings she began that year. Like Samaras's homage to Cornell, Hesse's work relating to Bontecou's sculpture also took the form of a two, not three-dimensional work on a small scale, focusing not on the immense surface of her reliefs—the 'sculptural' aspect of the work, as it were, that so 'floored' Hesse—but on the central void or secret that Bontecou's work posits. Drawn on an intimate scale, measuring only four by six inches square, and framed or boxed in with thick lines, these dark, ovoid and window-shaped ink drawings occupy an interesting place in Hesse's oeuvre. They situate her practice alongside Bontecou's earliest works from 1958 to 1960, in which she also worked on a small-scale, when she made her series of small boxes and accompanying soot drawings. Hesse, like Bontecou, was also to abandon the small-scale and intimate practices for an engagement with a larger scale in three-dimensions, and these ink works by Hesse formally share much with Bontecou's 'worldscape' drawings and boxes from this time.

Just as many of Hesse's sculptures mark out areas of absence and emptiness, with hung ropes that delineate space, squashed and sagging fibreglass buckets that seem to collapse under the pressure of space just as they contain and surround it, so these early ink drawings demonstrate an awareness of space and containment that finds a striking resonance with Bontecou's work. By this time, Bontecou had already exhibited twice in New York, the first time in 1959 at the Gallery G and the second, in the 'Americans '63' show held at MoMA in 1960, which Hesse, no doubt, would have seen.

Hesse's untitled drawing that refers to Bontecou's sculptural practice depicts a flattened oval, outlined in black and filled in with swathes and scratches of line

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<sup>32</sup> Bontecou, as quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York, 1992, p. 56.

and blocks of black colour which fill the page. The outer border of the black 'hole' is ringed in swirls of dirty-brown ink wash that reference the tawny sacking and burlap sheeting of Bontecou's reliefs. Whilst Hesse admitted to being 'floored' by Bontecou's practical achievements, what she focuses on in this drawing is the void itself; the blank hole that dominates Bontecou's structures. Just as Bontecou claimed it was the discovery of black that opened up the way that her work was to develop, so Hesse too is drawn to the void as material starting point for her own engagement with absence and space in her sculptural practice. What this untitled drawing points to, however, is that it is not Hesse's own encounter with the void or 'blackness' that inaugurated her working process, but rather, Bontecou's encounter with it, and her own encounter with Bontecou's work, through Bontecou herself. Although it is acknowledged that this drawing certainly does refer to Bontecou's work, the omission of Bontecou's name from the title renders this drawing as specific homage slightly more complex. Described as 'the conceptual testing ground' for Hesse's later works,<sup>33</sup> these drawings also show the origins of Bontecou's strategy. It is 'secreted', as it were, within Hesse's own oeuvre, haunting its original inception.

In another instance of secret homage and incorporation of another, an anecdote recalling how Cornell had incorporated Bontecou's image into one of his own homage boxes describes exactly the complicated spiral of intersections and networks of relations that a concept of 'homage' allows us to investigate. Cornell was very keen on Bontecou's work, and kept a file on her for several years, as well as charting their occasional meetings in his diaries with open admiration for her. For example, his diary entry from January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1962 reads,

clear and sunny again-penning now by the porch radiator-  
looking up to bus stops-light of L.B. boarding bus-came along  
quickly-poetry-enchancement of distance. Space-sybil-collage  
for her, alter ego-what a moment what an eternity in a moment-

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<sup>33</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Early Drawings: Ink Washes and Gouaches' in *Eva Hesse*, Elisabeth Sussman ed., San Francisco, 2002, p. 121. These drawings by Hesse were first exhibited in 1961 in a small group show 'Drawings: Three Young Americans', at the John Heller Gallery in New York.

again not necessarily personal obsession but way of seeing experiences, life...and yet...extraordinary creature.<sup>34</sup>

Bontecou's incorporation into the work of both Hesse and Cornell, for whom she was both 'amazing' and 'extraordinary' is a more personalised, explicit reference in the work and diaries of Cornell, whereas Hesse's reference in this small ink work, is less overt, and more 'secretive'. It is, rather, the complexity of Bontecou's and Hesse's structures that ultimately connects their work, the absurdity of trying to depict 'absence', although the fact that Bontecou was a successful artist was also important to Hesse, in terms of her own difficulties with being taken seriously as a woman artist at the time. Lucy Lippard points out that Hesse was impressed by the fact that Bontecou was the only woman artist represented by Castelli in the early sixties, and also later, that Bontecou had shown in Documenta 64. Lippard also claimed that 'Bontecou's focus on grey and black, on rough "natural looking" materials, and, above all, her highly abstract yet sexual imagery, can surely be related to Hesse's own decisions'.<sup>35</sup> It is not in terms of a shared language of sexual imagery that link these two artists, however, but rather in terms of the mode of spectatorship each demands.

Hesse's 1966 wall-hung piece *Hang-Up* (Ill. 2.27) marked a break from the reliefs she had made one year earlier at the end of her stay in Germany, such as *Ringaround Arosie* and *Oomamaboomba*, with their colourful mouldings, bound and painted protuberances, and coils of cord. These reliefs were much smaller than *Hang Up*, and, with their primary palette and pastel pinks, reference her drawings from the same year. Both the drawings and reliefs at this time demonstrate Hesse's use of coiled and wrapped cords and surfaces that recall the yarn-covered surfaces of Samaras's boxes. *Hang-up* is on a large scale, consisting of a two metre frame on the wall from which expands a ludicrously bandaged appendage, which loops back on itself, to create a lasso, or trip wire, demarcating

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Ann Caws, ed. *Joseph Cornell's Theatre of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters and Files*, New York, 1993. p. 286. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, eight years later in 1970, he recorded 'frightful overwrought Robert and Mother about Lee visiting that Saturday afternoon'.p. 453-4 . In another entry from February 1<sup>st</sup> 1962, Cornell described Bontecou's works as 'Lee's warnings', as quoted in Mona Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou's Warnings', *Art Journal*, vol. 53, no., 4, Winter 1994, pp. 56-61, p. 56. I have so far been unable to track down the box of Cornell's that incorporates Bontecou's image.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216, n. 11.



a space in which one can step into and become part of the work. As though acting-out the implications of Bontecou's earlier reliefs, in *Hang-Up*, the viewer becomes caught up within the frame and incorporated into the work. The blank space of the wall inside the swathed, painted frame is activated by the spectator, and their ensnarement within the rectangular 'pictorial' frame.

The grid of entrapment *Hang Up* articulates finds its stronger echo in Bontecou's later barred and toothed voids, where her wish to 'mentally scrape the viewer'<sup>36</sup> finds a more literal embodiment. In Bontecou's desire to capture '[s]omething soft...something hard...something aggressive,' we see something of the absurdity so often discussed in relation to the work of Hesse present also in Bontecou's work.<sup>37</sup> Each artist exploited the potential of the wall-hung work, enjoying the activation, and even deflation, in the case of some of Hesse's works, of the wall and space immediately in front of it. In the light of such radical renegotiations of the parameters of the three-dimensional object, to read the works as 'vaginal', 'phallic', seems, as Bontecou put it, 'reductive'.<sup>38</sup>

Carter Ratcliff, in his essay accompanying Bontecou's 1972 retrospective in Chicago described the complexity of her works in terms of their conjunction of the mechanical and biological, of 'carapaces, shells, exposed membranes',<sup>39</sup> whilst also still retaining a reading that highlights the 'powerful specificity of the openings they reveal—eyes, mouths, vaginas'.<sup>40</sup> Not all writers, however were so keen to describe the apertures in Bontecou's work in terms of bodily orifices. In

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<sup>36</sup> Bontecou, as quoted in Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou's "Warnings"', op.cit., p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Bontecou, as quoted in Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou-Heart of Conquering Darkness', op.cit., p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Rather than read her imagery as 'feminine', Hadler asks, is there not something empowering about the aggressive woman, the sexually violent counterpart to the militaristic violence of men in war? Isn't Bontecou, with her soot-covered laundry belts and aggressive imagery, expressing 'a new concept of women's work?' (Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou-Heart of Conquering Darkness', Ibid.) Hadler goes on: 'If it has been the role of woman to be the passive recipient of the gaze, does she not now look back defiantly with the hole—the eye, the camera eye—and confront with the sharp wire, the "mouth of truth", and the omnipresent darkness?' (p. 44) This supposed empowering of women through a language of aggressivity and 'angry sexuality' (p. 43) does little to reverse the problem of reading Bontecou's work in terms of a feminised, violently sexual set of images, which I am keen to distance my own reading from. Hadler is drawing upon Nancy Huston's 'The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes', in Susan Rubin Suleiman ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985.

<sup>39</sup> Carter Ratcliff, *Lee Bontecou*, Chicago, 1972, unpaginated.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

1965 John Ashbery questioned the widespread sexual reading of her work, as he tried to deflate such metaphorically laden descriptions, pointing out that 'it is hard to feel very erotic about something that looks like the inside of a very old broken-down air-conditioning unit'.<sup>41</sup> Other writers, however, were keen to keep the feminised, sexual accounts of her work strongly in play; in 1967 Udo Kultermann described the way in which Bontecou's works' 'holes and bulges' are 'as much a symbolic expression of the basic sex-wish as Kusama's objects overgrown with phalluses or nets'.<sup>42</sup> Writing in 1972, Robert Pincus-Witten wrote about the apparently obvious sexual imagery of Bontecou's work, when he refers to the 'frequent reference to a castration archetype, the *vagina dentata*' that her works always seem to invite.<sup>43</sup> Recent reviewers of her work have still felt compelled to refer to her work's 'allusion' to an 'ominous *vagina dentata*'.<sup>44</sup> Whilst not all writers and critics have been keen to attribute sexual readings to the void in Bontecou's work, it is a reading that has retained currency even today, which, although tempered somewhat by more nuanced accounts of her objects, is still referred to, if not condoned, in virtually all writing on the artist.<sup>45</sup>

The too-easy conflation of the void, 'hole' or 'circle' and feminine artistic practice finds its riposte in the work of male artist Lucio Fontana. Although he had been making sculptures for many years by the time Bontecou began working, it was not until 1949 that he first 'penetrated' the canvas, and it was 1958 before he first cut into it as he abandoned his three-dimensional practice for an prolonged engagement with the wall-mounted relief, specifically the holes, rents and sutures

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<sup>41</sup> John Ashbery, 'Fires that Burn in the Heart of the Void', *New York Herald Tribune*, Paris, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Udo Kultermann, *The New Sculpture: Environments and Assemblages*, New York and London, 1967, p.101.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Postmaximalism: American Art 1966-1986*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1987, p. 91.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Knight, 'Bontecou "Sculpture": Hybrid Eruptions', *Los Angeles Times*, Monday, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1993.

<sup>45</sup> See Lucy R. Lippard 'What is Female Imagery?', [1975], reprinted in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, New York, 1976, pp. 80-83 for a debate on the uses and applicability of the phrase 'feminine imagery' in contemporary women's artistic practice. Lippard is keen to stress that understandings of 'female imagery' in actual fact mean 'female sexual imagery'. Lippard lists the usual motifs attributed to female sexual imagery as 'circles, domes, eggs, spheres, boxes, biomorphic shapes, maybe a certain striation or layering', but claims that these are just too 'specific'. (p. 81). See also 'Judy Chicago talking to Lucy Lippard', op.cit., for a discussion of the usefulness of positing a feminine imagery in women's art.

it could incorporate.<sup>46</sup> Embarking on a project of spatial investigation, caught up within a wider project that seemed to imply the ruin, or undoing of the material structure of the object whilst at the same time emphasising its sheer materiality, Fontana claimed in 1963 'I am seeking to represent the void'.<sup>47</sup> Both Bontecou and Fontana had spent the early stages of their sculptural careers moulding small ceramic and terracotta figurines and animals, before they each abandoned small-scale three dimensional objects in the late fifties. By around 1957 Fontana shifted toward larger wall-mounted reliefs and, one year later, Bontecou also moved from constructing her small black boxes to the larger reliefs, and her own exploration of the void and 'blackness'.<sup>48</sup>

If Bontecou's works might be said to embody 'feminine imagery', then one need not look any further than Fontana's own works from the sixties to find the complication of such an easy conflation of woman artist and 'feminised' form. In *Concetto spaziale (Spatial Concept)* (Ill. 2.28) from 1963 the canvas has been painted bright pink, and is slit along the central vertical. Fontana would make the cut into the canvas before then pulling back the edges of the canvas and coating them in thick coats of paint. In these works the thickly coated acrylic lips of the ruptured surface evoke unmistakably vaginal readings that are far more potent than any such abstracted reference one might discover in Bontecou's work.

Rather than connect the two via a formal analysis of their 'sexual' imagery, however, it is the shared commitment to exploring the void and space that is most striking in both Fontana and Bontecou's work. More than simply an investigation into the spatial conditions of the wall-relief, what Fontana and Bontecou share is the violent way in which they carry out their respective projects. In his *Concetto Spaziale (Spatial Concepts)* works, Fontana would slash the canvas repeatedly, as though a large claw has burst through the membrane of the monochrome canvas; whilst in others, where the canvas has been peeled back and away to reveal the

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<sup>46</sup> Lucio Fontana 1899-1968: a retrospective, New York, 1977, p. 17-19.

<sup>47</sup> Lucio Fontana, from an interview in 1963, as quoted in Sarah Whitfield, *Lucio Fontana*, London, 1999, p. 148.

<sup>48</sup> Thanks to Alex Potts first drawing my attention to the way in which Fontana's works might also be imagined in relation to Bontecou.

black backing of the piece, the slit is more unctuous, as though it has slowly come apart, liquid surface frozen at the brink of its being split open.

Just as Samaras's incorporation of knives and pins into his boxes demonstrated how his work 'cuts' into the space of the Minimal in a way that functions as a kind of oblique 'linking' device, so it is the violent exploration and cutting into space that also 'links' Bontecou and Fontana. However violent that cut into space, or punctured hole might be, for Fontana the threat suggested is only ever partial. The cut remains neatly contained within the frame of the work, whereas in Bontecou's reliefs the void instead strains at the limit of its containment, figuring a tension between the void and the surface from which it protrudes.

It was this difference between their work that Judd also picked up on when he compared Fontana's works to the traditions of European painting in which the frame remains the defining limit of the image. Judd points out that the 'slits' in Fontana's canvases were always retained within the rectangular frame, unlike the jutting void in Bontecou's work where 'the periphery is as much a part of the single structure as the centre'.<sup>49</sup> It is the painterly distinctions between edges and centres, figure and ground, frame and outside space that Fontana's slits engage with, and which Bontecou's works strain against. Whilst the sexually charged reading of Bontecou's work persisted, the conflation of the so-called sexual forms within a violently charged rhetoric, typically crudely defined in terms of the vagina, instead found its most nuanced formulation in the form of a rather unlikely critic, Judd, whose description of the 'abatised orifice'<sup>50</sup> in her work as like a 'strange and dangerous object'<sup>51</sup> remains one of the strongest pieces of writing on her work.

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<sup>49</sup> Donald Judd, 'Lee Bontecou', *Arts Magazine*, no.39, April 1965, pp. 17-21, reprinted in *Donald Judd: The Complete Writings* op.cit., pp. 178-180, p. 178.

<sup>50</sup> Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects' [1965], reprinted in *Ibid.*, pp. 181-189, p. 188.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

When Judd reviewed Bontecou's exhibition at Leo Castelli's gallery in 1963 he wrote 'Bontecou is one of the best artists working anywhere',<sup>52</sup> a claim he was to back up in his 1965 full-length article on Bontecou, where he proclaimed her 'one of the first to use a three-dimensional form that was neither painting nor sculpture'.<sup>53</sup> Coming from the critic who was to publish in the same year his now-seminal essay 'Specific Objects', regarded as one of the first statements on the new Minimalist object, that opened with the claim 'half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture',<sup>54</sup> this was high praise indeed. As Alex Potts has pointed out, in his article on Bontecou Judd employed an extraordinary mode of description which, delivered in his customary deadpan style, activates a heavily metaphoric reading of Bontecou's work that nevertheless retains that minimal language of description and insistence on the formal properties and importance of the specific object.<sup>55</sup>

Judd's account of the work is a curiously sexualised one, in which he draws out what Alex Potts compellingly describes as the 'psychosexual dynamic' of Bontecou's work.<sup>56</sup> In the space of a few paragraphs, Judd moves from a description that absolutely tallies with the formal structure of the specific object, to one in which this 'strange object',<sup>57</sup> is 'seen with terror, as would a beached mine or a well hidden in the grass'.<sup>58</sup> The black crater is understood as a warhead, and the 'loricate' welded structure as a 'redoubt,' evoking a language of war and aggressivity in which 'the image also extends from bellicosity, both martial and psychological – aspects which do not equate – to invitation, erotic and psychological, and deathly as well'.<sup>59</sup>

To an extent, Judd's focus on the aggressivity of Bontecou's objects is part of his wider discussion of the types of material the new object-makers were employing. Judd refers to Flavin's use of industrial strip lights, and to Oldenburg's use of

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<sup>52</sup> Donald Judd, 'Lee Bontecou at Leo Castelli', *Arts Magazine* no. 35, December 1960, p. 56

<sup>53</sup> Donald Judd, 'Lee Bontecou', op.cit., p. 178.

<sup>54</sup> Judd, 'Specific Objects', op.cit., p. 181.

<sup>55</sup> Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, New Haven and London, 2000, p. 274.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Judd, 'Lee Bontecou', op.cit., p. 179.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

vinyl, as well as those other artists working with materials such as formica, aluminium, cold-rolled steel and plexiglas, materials that Judd identified as 'specific', due to their being used 'directly'.<sup>60</sup> For Judd, the obdurate nature of these materials, (under which heading would also be grouped Bontecou's use of dirty burlap and tarpaulin sheeting), lends these materials and, therefore these objects, an 'aggressive' aspect.<sup>61</sup> Although in this instance it is the non-art look of industrial, found and prefabricated materials that Judd addresses, in his writing on Bontecou he focuses on the aggressivity of the works in a way that exceeds the mere heavy-duty toughness of her materials. Instead, in this instance Judd ties the so-called 'aggression' of the material to the metaphoric aggression that the works suggest, an aggression which, for Judd, is fundamentally eroticised and sexually violent.

Judd's intimate engagement with Bontecou's objects, both formally and, more powerfully, in terms of their 'erotic' and 'deathly' connotations would seem fairly pedestrian were his comments restricted to her drawing practice. However, although the last page of the article does feature her drawing works, Judd restricts his comments to her three-dimensional objects, engendering a highly provocative reading of the abstracted forms. The object Judd devotes most of the article to discussing is an early relief from 1961, with a faceted surface of sections breaking out of the frame at the top right of the image in what Judd describes as a 'crest'. What is surprising in Judd's account is the selection of works he discusses. Although he mentions the bandsaw-teeth barred works, and cavities blocked with metal grilles, it is works such as *Untitled* (Ill. 2.29) from 1961, that he is most enamoured by. This makes the heavily loaded interpretation of the objects all the more startling as, although he seemingly has the other more 'militaristic' works such as *Untitled* (Ill. 2.30), also from 1961, in mind, it is the more overtly abstract pieces that he takes as his main focus.

Featuring two cavities, one slightly larger placed above the lower one, *Untitled* from 1961 has echoes of the gas mask imagery in its combination of canvas and metal. Eyelets are visible around the sides of the cavity, as though from a cut up

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<sup>60</sup> Judd, 'Specific Objects', op.cit., p. 187.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

army uniform, or piece of tent. The voids have been barred with two straight metal sheets, and lurch forward quite a distance, with the carapace of the cavities themselves punctured with small holes, carbuncle-like pockets suggesting yet more hidden centres and spaces. Situated somewhere between an android and a gun head, these works were *too* literal, *too* militaristic in their appearance for Judd. His one complaint is that Bontecou overloads her works, and he implores her to be more 'economical'<sup>62</sup> in her constructions. Judd wrote '[t]he reliefs were simple at first. Some reduction should be next'.<sup>63</sup> Just as he complained that Kusama went too far with her 'literary'<sup>64</sup> references of shoes and gloves in her 'Driving Image Show' in 1964, so he describes Bontecou's more complex reliefs, with their barred cavities and toothy bisected holes as 'ferocious in too literal a way',<sup>65</sup> so that the work 'nearly lapses into ordinary imagery'. It is the moment before their switch into merely, or obviously literal depiction that arrests the viewer so strongly. If, for Judd, the works with 'teeth', barred grimacing mouths or vagina-like openings operate too overtly on a register of illusion or figuration, then it is the freeing up of such fixed associations that he highlights as most potent. The violence, both erotic and martial he so eloquently and vehemently invokes stems not, then, from these object's formal specificity, but from Judd's encounter with the 'threatening and possibly functioning object'.<sup>66</sup>

A hostile encounter is staged through Judd's use of such combative language. A war is being staged here, the question is on what, or who. Potts compares Judd's use of a sexualised language in his writing on Bontecou to his article on Claes Oldenburg's 'soft sculpture', where light switches are identified as nipples, and the soft malleable forms he uses are described as 'grossly anthropomorphised'.<sup>67</sup> It is the turn that Judd's anthropomorphism takes that interests me in relation to Bontecou's work, where the erotically charged notion of soft fabric as a nipple takes on a rather more sexually aggressive tone. The thorny problem of anthropomorphism and the return of the body in sculptural practice recurs here

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 'Lee Bontecou', Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Judd, 'Specific Objects', Ibid., p. 189.

with all the force of the infantile drives, as Oldenburg's 'extremely anthropomorphic' light switch 'nipples', when read through Judd's account of Bontecou, return with all the aggressive, violent force of the Kleinian part-object.<sup>68</sup>

Referring to the extraordinary passage in which Judd sets out to describe Bontecou's works, in particular the black voids that probe forward, away from the object, Potts points out that Judd's usually vigorous formal and logical style gives way to a rhetoric of sexual fantasy 'that is every bit as self-aware as anything he writes about their formal logic'.<sup>69</sup> Potts argues that Judd's attempt at keeping both the sexually charged encounter these works evoke and the resolutely abstract specificity of the image as 'specific object' is a result of Judd's 'having it both ways'.<sup>70</sup> In one passage, Judd invokes the deathly, the aggressive, the sexual and the bodily, whilst all the time retaining the works position as specific object, insisting upon the materiality of the void as 'object'—that 'what you see is what you see' to repeat Frank Stella's famous dictum—when Judd claimed that '[t]he black hole does not allude to a black hole; it is one.'<sup>71</sup>

Describing Bontecou's 'grim, abyssal' objects in 'Specific Objects', Judd wrote

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<sup>68</sup> Mignon Nixon has written about the recent tendencies of certain women artists working in the 1990s to reject Lacanian-based theoretical approaches in favour of a Kleinian-based framework in which the infantile drives, as ungendered, non-regressive states, rather than structural phases to be worked through, have provided a more powerful interpretative model to work with. Nixon makes a fine case for a Kleinian reading of the object, and her engagement with the orally destructive drive and account of the schizoid splitting of the good and bad part-objects would make for a fascinating framework within which to think about Bontecou's works. See Mignon Nixon, 'Bad Enough Mother', op.cit. See also my unpublished MA thesis *From Eccentric to Geometric: Hesse, Minimalism and the Kleinian Position*, Essex University, 2000, in which I deploy a Kleinian framework in relation to the processes of exchange and incorporation that took place between Minimalism and the work of Eva Hesse between the years 1965-1967. Thank you to Margeret Iversen, who also suggested that a Kleinian framework might provide a fruitful way into thinking about Bontecou's objects.

<sup>69</sup> Potts, op.cit., p. 274.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>71</sup> The full quote reads: 'Usually an image is a form which primarily suggests something else; so far an image has been ambiguously descriptive; it has been dependant and intermediate. Bontecou hasn't changed the nature of the image but has extremely changed its emphasis. The dominant image, the central hole surrounding the canvas, is not primarily allusive and descriptive. The black hole does not allude to a black hole; it is one. The image does suggest other things, but by analogy; the image is one thing among similar things'. Judd, 'Lee Bontecou', op.cit., p. 178.



This threatening and possibly functioning object is at eye level. The image cannot be contemplated; it has to be dealt with as an object, at least viewed with puzzlement and wariness, as would any strange object, and at most seen with terror [...] The objects are loricated; fragments of old tarpaulins are attached to the black rods with twisted wire. Black orificial washers are attached to some pieces; some have bandsaw blades within the mouth. This redoubt is a *mons Veneris*. "The warhead will be mated at the firing position". The image also extends from bellicosity, both martial and psychological – aspects which do not equate – to invitation, erotic and psychological, and deathly as well.<sup>72</sup>

Judd's odd description of Bontecou's works, as conflating 'something as social as war to something as private as sex',<sup>73</sup> does indeed suggest an uneasy attempt on Judd's behalf to incorporate Bontecou's objects within the rhetoric of non-allusory object making that sought the replacement, not entrenchment, of outdated European modes of painterly, illusionistic works of art. More than merely a blip in Judd's systematisation of sculptural practice, (although a brief glance at the list of artists included in his 'Specific Objects' article raises questions of just how much of a system or collective description Judd actually intended),<sup>74</sup> this conflation of the sexual and the violent is shot through with the notion of the aggressor as fundamentally feminine. When Judd claims 'Bontecou's reliefs are an assertion of herself, of what she feels and knows',<sup>75</sup> it would seem that Judd is evoking a rather ambivalent attitude toward female sexuality through his conflation of the sexual and the violent; to quote Judd again: 'the warhead will be mated at the firing position'. This is clearly problematic, and is a result not of Judd's misogyny, but evidence, rather, of his attempt to resolve the dichotomy he has unwittingly set up between the 'allusional' and the resolute material specificity of Bontecou's work. That is, the 'having it both ways' of Judd's

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> It is important to emphasise the way in which Judd felt Bontecou's work absolutely embodied key problems in contemporary sculpture. A large section toward the end of 'Specific Objects' focuses on both Bontecou and Oldenburg, situating their practices alongside their contemporaries. It is for this reason that his article on Bontecou is so curious. See the introduction to this thesis where I address the peculiarities of 'Specific Objects', arguing that, far from its reading as a manifesto of the new 'minimal' sculpture, Judd is proposing a far more nuanced and wide-ranging model of practice which, nevertheless cannot be simply reduced to a sweeping account of the contemporary art scene.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

argument is not so much a flaw in his text, but a condition or symptom of Bontecou's work itself.

In some ways, though, Judd seems unable to disentangle the problems entrenched within his dichotomy. It was not until two years later that a response to the emergence of the abstractly sexual was again addressed seriously, in Lucy Lippard's article accompanying the exhibition 'Eccentric Abstraction' in 1966,<sup>76</sup> and the following year in an extended article published in the *Hudson Review*, entitled 'Eros Presumptive'.<sup>77</sup> In these articles Lippard discusses the work of Bontecou, alongside that of Samaras, Westermann and Hesse. In these articles Lippard refuses to accept that the works she discusses can be fixed in terms of a sexualised reading. Lippard claims that sexual metaphor is superseded in works by artists such as Hesse, Westermann, Samaras, Lindsey Decker and Frank Lincoln Viner, with a 'formal understatement'<sup>78</sup> that stresses the 'non-verbal response',<sup>79</sup> citing Bontecou's 'gaping reliefs'<sup>80</sup> as an example of how the 'evocative element'<sup>81</sup> may become 'subjugated'<sup>82</sup> to 'unexpected formal ends'.<sup>83</sup> Lippard claims that in these resolutely abstract works of art '[m]etaphor is freed from subjective bonds. Ideally, a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol, a semi-sphere is just that and not a breast'.<sup>84</sup> These artists, Lippard writes, want their work to be freed up, to refuse stable readings and interpretations of their work, preferring that 'their forms to be felt, or sensed, instead of read or interpreted'.<sup>85</sup> In her article 'Eros Presumptive', written at that moment in the sixties which she was allying her writing on those so-called 'eccentric abstraction' artists such as Eva Hesse, Jean Linder and Keith Sonnier with the theoretical tropes of Minimalism, Lippard claimed:

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<sup>76</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Eccentric Abstraction', *Art International*, vol. 10, no.9, November 1966, pp. 28-40.

<sup>77</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Eros Presumptive' [1967], reprinted in Battcock, *Ibid.*, pp. 209-222.

<sup>78</sup> Lippard, 'Eccentric Abstraction', *op.cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

Younger artists today, however, no longer depend on symbols, dream images, and the “reconciliation of distant realities”; they minimize the allusive factor in an attempt to fuse formal and evocative elements. Ideally, form and content are an obsolete dualism.<sup>86</sup>

Echoing to a large extent the language of specificity that Judd was arguing for two years earlier, Lippard is deploying a mode of addressing abstract form through eroticism, that is, erotic allusion, arguing that abstracted eroticism is more powerful than literal erotica. Lippard is using Judd’s own rhetoric, at the same time allowing it to incorporate the visceral, bodily and erotic metaphors that such objects may entail. To an extent, then, Lippard’s claims in this article may be understood as addressing those very problems I have been raising in regard to Judd’s account of Lee Bontecou’s structures and his complicated working through of the notion of a works having both specificity of form and metaphoric imagery, or ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ imagery.<sup>87</sup> By 1975, however, Lippard had retracted those earlier claims that privileged the abstract form over the actual imagery suggested. Lippard claimed that she felt obliged, as part of the male, intellectually-oriented Minimal art scene at the time, to incorporate a Minimalist rhetoric, something she was to systematically refute by the early seventies, when, she claimed, ‘the time has come to call a semisphere a breast if we know damn well that’s what it suggests, instead of repressing the association and negating an area of experience that has been dormant except in the work of a small number of

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<sup>86</sup> Lippard, ‘Eros Presumptive’, in Battcock, op.cit., p. 212.

<sup>87</sup> Judd distinguishes between the objects ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ imagery in his article. It is here that his argument demonstrates Judd’s determination to ‘have it both ways’, as Potts so neatly put it. Here, Judd’s argument is dependant upon the acceptance that in Bontecou’s work there is a primary imagery, that is, the resolutely abstract form that nevertheless manages to convey meaning that extends from ‘something as social as war to something as private as sex’, and also that there is a secondary imagery that is too suggestive, too ‘literal’ in its allusion. In this instance, it is the ‘crest’ like image he sees at the upper corner of *Untitled* (1961) which is the ‘too literal’ aspect of the work: ‘In the work described, one of the great flaring forms arcs across an upper corner, suggesting a crest. This is an older, less formidable kind of image’. Confused as his claim might be, his description of the secondary imagery as being ‘too literal’ echoes his similar views on certain works of Kusama’s, where he felt her work was ultimately let down through its being too literal, or figurative. Ultimately, it seems that Judd is trying to claim that in Bontecou’s work, she manages to achieve the right balance between the two, something Kusama did not.

artists [...] To see a semisphere as a breast does not mean it cannot be seen as a semisphere and as endless other things as well'.<sup>88</sup>

It seems that for both Judd and Lippard, it is the phantasmatic return of the body that is at stake in Bontecou's work. What is so startling about this return is the fundamentally violent, aggressive and feminised turn this body takes, particularly in Judd's text. This troping of the female figure as an aggressive, violent threat has been described by Barbara Creed as the 'monstrous feminine'. In her book *The Monstrous Feminine: film, feminism, psychoanalysis* (1993), Creed challenges the view of most horror film theory which always casts woman in the role of victim.<sup>89</sup> She argues that the origins of the 'monstrous' stems not from the male body but from the female, maternal one. Creed reformulates those claims that focus on woman or the mother as castrated, instead claiming that she functions just as powerfully 'monstrous', if not more so, when cast as castrator. Creed claims that when Freud and Lacan cast woman as castrated, or as 'lack' in their psychoanalytic models, they are in fact repressing the figure of the castrating woman, the *femme castratrice*, or, in Creed's terms, the 'monstrous-feminine'.

Of course, this move to see woman as aggressor rather than victim is deeply problematic, and is an issue Creed acknowledges, as she tracks instances of the strong, wronged woman in films becoming psychotic, crazed and irrational. To cast woman as castrator rather than castrated, whilst neatly inserting 'woman' back into the psychoanalytic domain from which she has previously been remaindered as 'lack' by both Freud and Lacan, raises difficult questions in relation to the patriarchal framework of psychosis and aggression she is placed within.<sup>90</sup> As Mignon Nixon has recently pointed out in her important article on women's artistic practice, aggressivity and violence are not the sole preserve of 'woman', but, rather, 'aggression—and especially efforts to suppress it—rather

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<sup>88</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'The Women's Art Movement-What Next?', *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected feminist essays on art*, New York, 1995, p. 83. Briony Fer discusses this point in her article 'Objects Beyond Objecthood', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.22, no.2, 1999, pp. 25-36.

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London, 1993.

<sup>90</sup> See footnote 38 for a discussion of Mona Hadler's claim that the aggressivity of Bontecou's work should be reclaimed as a positive model of feminised violence, as somehow 'empowering' the woman artist.

than sexual development, is the pivotal site of psychic struggle'.<sup>91</sup> As Nixon points out, in relation to a Kleinian-based framework of infantile drives, aggression and the logic of the part-object, aggressivity and a desire to attack, swallow, bite and incorporate, function at the level of all subjectivities. Klein's most dramatic divergence from Freudian theory, Nixon writes, 'is her refusal of the primacy of castration'.<sup>92</sup> Rather than the father or mother figure being the subjects under attack in the infant's earliest stages of psychic development, it instead those part-objects that inhabit the infant's environment, which are under attack. It is not an exclusively female construction, but a necessary stage of pre-Oedipal development. It is on the site of the pre-Oedipal, that is, neither fixed masculine or feminine, that I argue the reliefs of Bontecou are also situated.

Remembering Bontecou's own plea that the individual make of her work what they will, I want to try and wrest Bontecou's work from a reading that ties her work both to a moment of feminist art production in the early seventies, (remembering that by 1970 Bontecou had totally withdrawn from the art world) and to readings that are problematic for their violently sexualised account of her work. I want to highlight the need for interpretation between the two, to take up Bontecou's invitation and think about her work in terms of the specificities of that one-one-one encounter between object and spectator when faced with her wall-mounted works.

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I first saw Bontecou's 1961 work *Untitled* (Ill. 2.31) when it was still inside its packing case, in the darkened storage facility of the Whitney Museum in New York. It incorporates rope alongside the more familiar materials of grimy burlap, welded steel armature and metal casing, with the large void barred in this instance with a double row of sharp bandsaw teeth. Standing alone in such close proximity

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<sup>91</sup> Nixon, 'Bad Enough Mother', op.cit., p. 79.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 78. In many ways, a Kleinian reading could serve as the model for this chapter. However, although allowing for a slippage of positions in which neither part-object nor subject position is fixed, it is, fundamentally, the void as absent, rather than as part-object, that I am keen to insist upon in this chapter, although there is a large area of cross-over in which the fantasies attached to that void absolutely coalesce with Klein's understanding of the part-object.

to this imposing six foot high work was unnerving. The urge to read the crater as bodily, evoking biting, chomping jaws, or, in the case of the black empty void in the work on the right, as a blind staring eye, or sexual orifice, was almost irresistible. Limply hanging down from the side of the central cavity is a thick piece of rope, defying the spectator to follow their instinct and tug it. The restraints put upon the viewer by the gallery in which tactile contact with an object is forbidden are here fetishised; the viewer is drawn to the rope which promises so much in terms of a possible activation of the object (will the teeth chomp together, comically, will the other peripheral open holes suddenly snap shut?) but which we cannot bring ourselves to reach out and grab.

When confronted with one of these objects in the flesh, the smell of the fabric and metal, and the cold stale air that is tangible inside the crater is unsettling. In one encounter with Bontecou's work, when I attempted to photograph a void in close-up, I inserted my hand deep into the hole, trying to get a shot of the underside of the surface. I removed my hand too quickly, resulting in a useless shot that denoted the nervous shake of my hand rather than a detail of the work. Just as Audrey Hepburn's anxiety at inserting her hand into the famous *Mouth of Truth* in William Wyler's *Roman Holiday* found its concrete realisation in Gregory Peck's pretence of having his hand bitten off, (Ill. 2.32 and Ill. 2.33) so the hole in Bontecou's work seems somehow less inert and passive when it is *my* arm that is stretched inside it, when *my* liminal boundaries are at stake.<sup>93</sup>

Eclipsing readings of the orifice as *vagina dentata*, or open mouth, is another equally psychically charged orifice, the eye. As psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel so succinctly put it, in psychoanalytic language, 'to look at = to devour'<sup>94</sup>. Fenichel probes the aggressive, incorporative role of the libidinised eye in psychic life, citing fairy tales, Greek myths and folklore accounts that imbue the eye with magical, or aggressive qualities. From the Basilisk's glance that turns you to stone, the enormous eyes of Red Riding Hood's grandmother that she noted

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<sup>93</sup> Both Elizabeth Smith and Mona Hadler point out Bontecou's interest in the Mouth of Truth in their respective articles on the artist. Elizabeth T. Smith, 'Abstract Sinister', op.cit., and Hadler, 'Lee Bontecou-Heart of a Conquering Darkness', op.cit.

<sup>94</sup> Otto Fenichel, 'The Scopophilic Instinct and Identification', [1935], *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel*, Hanna Fenichel and David Rapaport eds., London, 1954, pp. 373-397, p. 373.

before being swallowed whole, even to Freud's own library, where, in Hoffman's *The Sandman* children are threatened with sand being thrown into their eyes to make them sleep, the eye has haunted literature and folklore as a potentially threatening orifice. Those oracular phantasies embodied within the scopophilic gaze of the viewing subject become complicated when that eye/void is, in the case of Bontecou's reliefs, vacant, or 'blind'. Also interesting here is that the most common psychic comparison with the eye stems not from the female body, but the male; although, as Fenichel explains, such readings are never fixed, for 'the eye symbolizes not only the penis, but a vagina (and a mouth)'.<sup>95</sup>

Imagining the void here as a libidinised orifice gives rise to a shifting site of sadistic psychic fantasy ranging from the *vagina dentata*, to the orally devouring mouth, to the aggressive and scopophilic drive of the gaze. There is a palpably libidinal charge to these unflinching bodily correlates that hang at head-height to meet, greet, or possibly eat us that invokes a highly-charged encounter in which my body and position in front of the work seems to be under threat. Fenichel picks up on the fundamentally sadistic nature of the scopophilic gaze, the sexualisation of the gaze that exceeds mere 'looking'. Identification of the eye as sexual orifice incorporates that sexually charged encounter Judd describes. If, as Fenichel claims, the first point of identification of the eye is with the penis, then a reversal of possession occurs in the case of Bontecou's work.

However, rather than cast that switch in terms of a reversal, I want to think of it in terms of a removal of those terms. Between those works of Bontecou's featuring barred cavities, with their rows of bandsaw teeth, and those punctuated with vacant holes, a shift occurs, from the hole as actively aggressive to its being passively receptive. However, the lure of the void poses just as strong a threat to my liminal bounds as the gnashing teeth; for utter incorporation by the void involves just as visceral an act of dissolution. Bontecou always refused to discuss how or what her works might mean, specifically that central crater. What kind of a 'worldscape' might be figured in these works that map a topography in which absence is plotted, rather than what is actually there? When mapped onto the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

worldscape of the spectator, the coordinates of Bontecou's topography seem to converge at the point at which those missing segments or blind spots find their analogue in the spectator's psychic terrain, a workscape that Bontecou claimed she wanted to 'mentally scrape'.

Whatever else might be at stake in interpreting these works, then, from the notion of their embodying a kind of 'feminine imagery', to their being three-dimensional counterparts to the muted, collaged patches of colour found in synthetic cubism, it is through the engagement of the spectator, whom Bontecou wished to 'mentally scrape', that she sought to activate her work. The twists of sharp metal wire that pierce and damage the fabric skin, fixing it to the edges of the cavity opening provide a stark warning to the viewer, as though a barbed-wire fence, a warning to whoever might dare trespass inside. The small tears that have appeared in several works as the fabric skin loses its elasticity over time, demonstrate on the surface the damage it may in turn inflict upon us, a threat stated even more viscerally in those reliefs incorporating the rows of bandsaw teeth. Any tactile, close-up intimacy with the work is abruptly curtailed by the series of spiky twists or sharp teeth, that will prove as damaging to our touch as they are to the fabric they already shred and tear, scratching and scraping our soft flesh. To scrape means to scratch away, to remove or reveal an underside, that which is hidden. Finding a literal counterpart in the construction of her own works then, whose 'insides' are on display for all to see, with the seams, stains and working process on show as though the work is somehow turned inside-out, Bontecou's desire to metaphorically perform the same operation on the viewer, of subcutaneous scraping away of our selves, resonates with aggression and violence.

That engagement with the viewer of Bontecou's work, whose liminal boundaries and physical body space are put under pressure in front of the object, finds its analogue in the object's attack also on the space of sculpture itself. An installation shot taken of Bontecou's show at Leo Castelli in 1960 (Ill. 2.34), articulates the pressure the object is under. Facing these works straight on, one's eye is drawn to the black crater, or craters, which are usually situated just off-centre from the work, protruding directly ahead, or listing slightly off-kilter from the square or rectangular metal frame to which they are fixed. Varying from



single cavity to double, or even multiple openings, the series of holes that punctuate the surfaces of Bontecou's work repeat when hung together across the gallery wall. There is the suggestion that the depth of the black cavities continues inward, and back into the wall, casting the work as a container. At the same time, however, they seem to threaten to spill out and over, pouring into and pervading the space of the gallery, and, more threateningly, the space of the spectator in front of it. The photograph accompanying a review in a French newspaper of Bontecou's work on show in Kassel, Germany for Documenta 3, from 1964 (Ill. 2.35), in which a male viewer inserts his head inside a cavity neatly captures the sense of impending violence and damage to one's liminal boundaries under examination here. This spectator's desire to examine the void has been fulfilled at the expense of losing himself inside it. Unlike the way in which the spectator 'peers' into Samaras's boxes, in which the physical threat to one's body is only partial, the loss of this viewer's head raises the stakes in terms of the kind of wholesale bodily assault Bontecou's sculpture enacts.

What this sideways view of the work also demonstrates (at this spectator's loss) is the sheer physicality of the void that asserts itself both at the expense of the spectator and of the previously safe space of sculpture itself as a thing to be absorbed and looked *at*. Like the tin can that glints up from the water surface, back at the young Lacan sitting on a fishing boat, the realisation that things in the world might *look back* at us demands a radical negotiation of one's subject position in that world of seeing and being seen. That the void looks back at me, returns my gaze, draws attention to the insides of the object, that 'depth of field' which, as Lacan points out, 'is in no way mastered by me'.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the object that 'looks' back 'grasps me, solicits me at every moment'.<sup>97</sup> It captures me at the point of light, which traps the subject and, in the case of Bontecou's relief in this photograph, plays out a fundamentally violent destabilising or effacement of the subject, an effect that I described in chapter one in another context, as the object's 'wrong-footing' of the spectator.

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<sup>96</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, London, 1998, p. 96.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

I want to conclude with another account of a subject suddenly thrown into disarray, this time not by light, but by darkness. This account is offered, somewhat surprisingly, by Merleau-Ponty who, in 1962 outlined, in an account of the way in which subjects experience objects in the dark, a frightening encounter in which one's spatially bound situation unravels, and the distance between the subject and the object of their perception is put under pressure. I want to think about the void in Bontecou's work in relation to Merleau-Ponty's description, in which he imagines the unbinding of those spatially articulated experiences he discusses elsewhere.<sup>98</sup> Merleau-Ponty is thinking about the bodily experience we encounter at night, when standing in absolute nocturnal darkness. He invokes the notion of the blinded subject being devoured by space, as distance between subject and 'clear and articulate'<sup>99</sup> object is, he writes, 'abolished'.<sup>100</sup> Night is not an object that stands before me, he goes on, but instead it 'enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses [...] almost destroying my personal identity'.<sup>101</sup> Space is not a setting, an ether in which things float, but a connective device which, in the light of day, allows me to articulate my boundaries from those of others. This disarticulation of one's boundaries that occurs in that encounter with blackness describes the experience of works by Bontecou. If, as Merleau-Ponty claimed, 'the outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross',<sup>102</sup> then the threat of transgressing, or abolishing those boundaries becomes both physical and psychic.

Bontecou's objects demand that you approach with caution. They are oppressive objects, with their own peculiar smell, emitting a strange aura, in which the temperature inside the cavity feels several degrees cooler than the air outside. For all their decaying fabrics and torn surfaces, Bontecou's objects retain a strikingly vital element. The smooth, tawny brown and rusty reds of the surface, that from a distance appear as though they are two-dimensional paintings, reveal themselves

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<sup>98</sup> It is interesting to note, of course, the centrality of Merleau-Ponty's writing for Robert Morris, and other artists and writers during this period, where his phenomenological account of subjectivity came almost to read as a model for how we encounter Minimalist sculpture.

<sup>99</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, [1962], Colin Smith trans., London, 2002, p. 330.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

upon closer examination to be spiky, rusty, and smelly objects. The dank air is felt as though a shallow breath on your face, the head-height void seems poised for action, whether to wink, blink, yawn, bite or grin. It seeks my attention, my body as counterpart, it captures me, the absorbing draw of the velvet-black crater seduces me utterly. It demands my bodily participation, a nervy complicity. The threat to my space is tangible, and the implicit suggestion that it might spill out and over, incorporating the space of the room within its epidermal covering, or split its seams and burst out of its skin, is unsettling, presenting a threat to my own body and entrapped position in front of it.

The voracity of Bontecou's reliefs stems from the way in which they engage space. At once sucking in and incorporating the outside space within their spiky, stained, sharp and torn carapaces, at the same time spilling out, and into that space, they embody a kind of spatial ambiguity that shares much with Mark Cousins's investigation into the ontology of the category of 'the ugly'. Whilst 'beautiful' objects find their physical counterparts in the world, in most part agreed upon by all, the ugly object, claims Cousins, finds its definition only in terms of what it is not. The spatial (and ontological) status of the ugly object is uncertain, all that can be claimed is that it encroaches upon the space and category of other things, 'for the ugly object is voracious and, through contamination, will consume the entire zone. This demonstrates that an important aspect of the ugly object is its relation to space – including [...] the space of the subject'.<sup>103</sup> The voracity of the ugly object, whose excessive presence 'is not static but is always eating up the space between it and the subject'<sup>104</sup> devours both its own space and the space of the subject, activating a breakdown of subjectivity that finds its embodiment in the wall-mounted reliefs of Bontecou.

This encounter between object and subject comes under attack as one's subject position is relinquished, or lost. What if the space between myself and the object becomes, as Merleau-Ponty describes my bodily experience in the dark, 'pure depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without any

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<sup>103</sup> Cousins, 'The Ugly', *AA Files*, no.28, 1994, p. 63.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

distance separating it from me?’<sup>105</sup> When those voids are understood in terms of a voracity—of vision, of desire, as lack, whatever—that identification becomes rather more viscerally physical and potentially damaging to me. Instead of my analogue, the object becomes my aggressor, the impending source of my undoing.

The spectator becomes incorporated into the object, ensnared by it, through standing too close to the void, or voids, in all their material facture and metaphoric status as ‘absent’, ‘not-there’. I may be swallowed whole, or devoured in small, scratchy, bodily fragments. A phantasmatic shredding of my boundaries is threatened, as the barred teeth and hundreds of dusty spikes of wire trace my outline, scratching into my flesh. I disappear in the presence of that object of which I am made a part, or at least, complicit party to. The dematerialisation of the object is here reconfigured as a war being waged on the space of sculpture that, in the case of Bontecou’s work, extends also to a war waged on the space of my own subjectivity.

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If by the 1960s, sculptural practice can be crudely schematised in terms of the move from specificity of objecthood to the subsequent dematerialisation of the object, then Bontecou’s reliefs can be said to exemplify that shift. Rather than merely articulating a switch of focus from object to subject—that is, the space outside of the object which installation, performance and conceptual art have sought to investigate—what Bontecou’s works do is maintain the tension between the two. The object is not relinquished, neither is the space and position of the viewer facing it. Instead, it is the encounter between the two that is dramatised.

Just as Abraham and Torok describe the situation whereby the subject, indeed the ‘whole world’ might be ‘swallowed up’ in the cataclysmic disaster of the secret being spilled, so the void in Bontecou’s reliefs ultimately stands as an embodiment of that encrypted secret, with its secret centre that traps rather than intrigues the spectator, enacting on a physical level the psychic consequences of

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<sup>105</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.*, p. 330.

the discovery of that secret as traumatic crypt ensconced within the subject.<sup>106</sup> To return, once more, to the origins of Bontecou's overwhelming, large wall-mounted reliefs, it is those small, soot-black boxes that, for Bontecou, functioned as 'both secrets and shelter' which, harboured at the heart of her own working practice, most clearly articulate this kernel of secrecy around which all later works were structured, and which, in turn, structure that immanent threat of irruption, or swallowing whole, that the void threatens.

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<sup>106</sup> Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, 'The Topography of Reality: Sketching a Metapsychology of Secrets', [1971] in *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1, Chicago, 1994, p. 158.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Bric-a-Brac: The Objects of HC Westermann*

*Korea* (Ill. 3.1) is a glossy pine cabinet made in 1965 by H.C. Westermann at the height of his twenty-five year career. It has a glass-fronted door that opens onto five compartments, each of which is filled with an array of found objects. From the ivory shark fin to the knotted ball of twine, the slats of stacked wood and the smooth white pebble, the contents seem less to constitute a whole than comprise a cabinet of curiosities, a cornucopia of juxtaposed random objects. Connected by a sense of nostalgia, the dark wood casing, hand-crafted shelving and carved lettering seem to speak from another time of collecting and display, evocative of the seventeenth-century *wunderkammer*, a kind of 'memory box' filled with the remnants of past times and encounters.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of the cabinet of curiosity as site of the secret and private desires and hoardings of an individual provides a fascinating model in relation to the work of Westermann, who constructed many works of art comprising oddities, trinkets and found objects. It is, however, the way in which Westermann brought these elements together, through his choice of hand-crafted materials and carpentry, that distinguishes his project from the collector's cabinet. The use of *bric-a-brac*, of found objects and nostalgic emblems, whilst crucial to his pieces, is always situated within a framework of construction and sculpting that is not associated with this form of collecting. That the cabinet of curiosities was an object of fascination and secrecy, however is a feature absolutely echoed in Westermann's

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<sup>1</sup> The *wunderkammer* is often understood in relation to Surrealist models of collecting and object-making, for example, André Breton's mixed media assemblages such as *Song-Object* (1937), and the whimsical box-worlds of Joseph Cornell, briefly discussed in chapters one and two of this thesis. See also Emily Apter's comparison of the fin-de-siècle bourgeois interior as a kind of cabinet of curiosity, crammed with objects as though a museum, part of a wider cultural phenomenon of what Apter calls 'bric-a-bracomania' at the time, Emily Apter, 'Cabinet Secrets: Peep Show, Prostitution, and Bric-a-bracomania in the Fin-de-Siècle Interior', in *Feminising the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn of the Century France*, Ithaca, 1991. For a recent survey of the various forms they have taken throughout history, see the recent book by Patrick Mauries, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, London, 2002. See also Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, Elizabeth Wiles-Portier, trans., Cambridge, 1990, and Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe*, Oxford, 1985.

oeuvre, particularly in the box and vitrine works that he constructed throughout his career.

The exterior of *Korea* is more contemporary in its concerns and references than its evocative interior contents. Westermann has stamped KOREA down the left-hand side of the door, with a crudely carved skull underneath, a motif he frequently repeated. Between the black letters is inscribed the name of the marine corps Westermann served in during the Korean war, and above the door has been etched a carved picture of U.S.S. Enterprise, the ship he was assigned to during the Second World War, the 'gallopin' ghost' as it was known, the most decorated ship of the war. Down the right hand side of the door has been scratched the image of a plane on fire, hurtling downward, an image referencing the many kamikaze planes deployed by the Japanese during the Second World War to attack US naval ships, including the Enterprise.

In *Korea*, a wooden knife 'pierces' the left hand side of the cabinet, cutting through to the tip of the ivory shark fin. The distinction between the explicitly biographical references of the exterior surfaces and the secret language of the interior compartments is blurred. This wooden knife enacts a strategy of cutting, what I described in chapter one as a paradoxical method of linking or bringing together, by breaking a connection in order to cause damage to the whole. This method goes some way to accounting for the somewhat disjointedness both of *Korea* and Westermann's oeuvre as a whole.

Collaged together in *Korea* are remnants and fragments of the two wars Westermann was actively engaged in, conflated into one mnemonic object that ensures neither will be forgotten, and named after the one that history has tried its hardest to forget.<sup>2</sup> Westermann has pieced together an enigmatic box, filled with biographic incident crystallised into a series of motifs that speak his own private visual language. The figure of the so-called Death Ship is just one of Westermann's many recycled and repeated images, a shifting motif that he used in a variety of different ways, retaining always the same simple form, listing to one

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953*, New York, 1987.

side like a ship at sea. From the top of the cabinet a large carved hand stands erect, grasping a piece of rope, a bodily metonym where a part stands for the whole, which here substitutes Westermann as both seafaring sailor and skilled carpenter, whose carefully crafted works depend entirely upon the role of the artist's hand.

Westermann often incorporated elements of the body in his objects, most obviously the series of robotic, boxy *personnage* figures he made, for example, the two large pendant pieces *The Silver Queen* from 1960 and *Swingin' Red King* from 1961, painted silver and red respectively.<sup>3</sup> These tectonic forms have no arms, they are disabled and inactive figures of helplessness that Westermann repeated in other *personnage* works, in particular the later *Hutch the One Armed Astro-Turf Man with a Defense* from 1976, that has only one arm, the other cut off above its astro-turfed elbow. This *personnage* is headless, a favourite ploy of Westermann's, with a carved pine baseball glove resting on top of its shoulders. Fragments stand for wholes in the *personnage* works, as Westermann saves his most intricate detailing for the inanimate dove and scarf joints, neatly-compacted corners and smoothly-planed surfaces of the forms he is most comfortable with: the naval ship, a wooden home, the carefully packed box.

Rather than deny the viewer access from the outset, as Samaras's early plaster stuffed wooden boxes certainly did, *Korea*, with its exterior surface details and clear-glass door, instead invites entry into its curious interior contents. This work finds Westermann developing a secret language that seemingly describes personal experiences and biographic incidents whilst simultaneously encrypting them. This encryption ensures that they become remaindered, as though mnemonic emblems that stand for those traumatic experiences of Westermann's life as a marine during the Second World War and again, during the Korean war.

Westermann's sculptures do not explicitly narrate the details of his own experiences at sea, a harrowing catalogue of episodes and scenes, which included his witnessing several kamikaze attacks on his own ship as well as the death of

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<sup>3</sup> 'Personnage' is Dennis Adrian's term for Westermann's humanistic assemblages. See 'Some Notes on H.C. Westermann', *Art International*, February 1963, p. 52.



many of his fellow marines at sea. Rather than carrying any kind of specific biographic detail, these horrific encounters of Westermann's are instead substituted by a set of motifs, such as the crudely etched kamikaze plane, the sheer horror of witnessing such a thing here concealed in generality. The same is true of the anchors, boats and shark fins that he would depict time and time again. Rather than being 'about' Westermann's encounters whilst at sea, they instead figure as almost timeless representations of a seafaring life, almost corny and romantic clichés which Westermann developed and employed as his sculptural language.

It is not just his own biographic encounters that Westermann reduces to a set of stock symbols, but also the means by which he achieves this. He used a limited set of materials in all of his works, changing their appearance and form in order to generate an eclectic variety of effects. For example, from the right hand side of *Korea* a length of carved 'metal' chain hangs, and from the bottom of the wooden chain is suspended a carved wooden Yale lock. Although he used both wood and metal in his sculptures, Westermann chose to depict this length of chain in wood, not metal, just as, in other works, he would paint wood to look like marble, and use silver paint to resemble 'metal'. This practice, of using one thing to stand for or represent another, as fake effects or illusions, enables Westermann to expand the uses and possibilities of a restricted set media and materials. Westermann loved this process of metamorphosis, as critic April Kingsley pointed out, 'for its magic-making potential'.<sup>4</sup> This is an important strategy of Westermann's to which I shall return in some detail.

Whilst, in many respects *Korea* stands as typical example of both Westermann's working practice and the kinds of motifs and imagery he worked with in the construction of his objects, it is a slightly earlier work by Westermann that opens onto the thematic of encryption I am pursuing here. Made one year prior to *Korea* in 1964, and entitled *Secrets* (Ill. 3.2), this is another small-scale box, not from the beginning of his career, as with Samaras and Bontecou, but concealed right at its centre. However, this box could likewise stand as a mythic origin point of

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<sup>4</sup> April Kingsley, 'Narrating Life's Existential Fuck-Up', *The Village Voice*, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1978.

Westermann's work, providing the key to unlock his private visual language. Westermann was already a successful sculptor at the time he constructed *Secrets*, which makes its exclusion from virtually all accounts of his life and career particularly striking. This walnut and brass box, with its beautifully finished surface and joinery and careful attention to detail, is trademark Westermann. On the top of the lid Westermann has inlaid the word 'secrets' in brass, and at opposite ends of the lid he has fastened two hinges, so that the lid cannot open, even as it seemingly invites us to lift it up and look in. *Secrets* demonstrates, perhaps more explicitly than any other work addressed in this thesis, the thematic of concealment and encryption at work in all these artists' works. By entitling this work *Secrets*, Westermann very clearly set in place the material status of the art object as secret, at the same time, with its double-hinged lid, neatly spelling out the structure of such a strategy.

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An interesting story about Westermann demonstrates that a mythic episode might be the 'secret' concealed at the centre of this box. The anecdote relates Westermann's interest in carpentry to the career of his maternal grandparent, Grandfather Bloom, with whom Westermann also shared a birthday. Bloom was an established mortician and coffin maker in Oklahoma at the turn of the nineteenth century, and an incredibly skilled woodworker. The year after his wife died, Bloom made a series of twelve ornate, impeccably finished small boxes, complete with intricate dovetailing, marquetry and embossed details, which became family treasures in the Westermann home. As a child Westermann loved to handle these boxes, with their inlaid phrases and dedications such as *Think of Me Kindly* (Ill. 3.3) providing a model for his own later, more punning titles, in turn picked up by artists Bruce Nauman and William T. Wiley (which I return to in chapter four). What is not commented on in relation to Westermann's practice and that of his Grandfather Bloom is the fact that in 1926, when Westermann was only four years old, Bloom committed suicide. This tragedy, once acknowledged, subsequently removes these twelve boxes from their previous status as much-loved, family treasures to a family secret that is traumatic; materialisations of

those inherited phantoms or familial secrets that Abraham and Torok explore, and which Westermann's grandfather's suicide embodied.

In a way, this story, understood in conjunction with *Secrets*, contains the germ of Westermann's own engagement with carpentry, riven with death and the loss of his grandfather. A chain of transgenerational events come to focus on the traditional techniques of carpentry, which was itself caught up in a narrative of death and coffin making in his family, and which went on to haunt not only the production of Westermann, but of Nauman and Wiley, and all those subsequently affected by Westermann's work. My point is not, however, to track back biographic links between artists and other artists, or even artists and their objects, let alone grandfathers, but is instead to imagine the kinds of secrets that, wittingly or not, go into, inform and ultimately get locked into or 'encrypted' within those objects and the viewer's subsequent encounters with them. My interest in tracking the 'transgenerational phantom' does not lie in looking back over Westermann's life and pointing to 'this' incident and 'that' which may have fuelled his art in some way. Rather, what concerns me, and what this mythic 'secret' about Grandfather Bloom articulates, is the kinds of psychic dramas the objects themselves might be seen to incorporate and enact.

Although life experiences, family traumas and secret motifs certainly do recur in Westermann's oeuvre, we shall see that it was not a cathartic playing-out, but rather the development of a secret bank of stock images and symbols that Westermann used and re-used in his sculpture. In the following discussion, I want to distance my work from those biographical accounts of Westermann's work in order to draw out what is more pressing in his own creative use of biography; his development of something more like a *strategy* for his biography, of a life recast in, and as, representation, a point neatly summed up in a self-portrait Westermann made in 1959, sent with a letter to his wife, in which he depicted himself made-up of tools. Titled *Cliff Made of Tools* (Ill. 3.4), this comical image shows Westermann quite literally 'as' the tools of his trade, as a 'Westermann'; with a saw, nails, measuring rule and pliers, atop the muscled, crossed arms of Westermann, complete with his Marine corps number and trademark anchor. The

large thought bubble coming from the side of his head contains a piece of wood, the carpenter's initial building block.

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Westermann's use of traditional craftwork like carpentry alongside his use of figurative objects, literary titles and jokey references earned him a reputation as a dada-joker, a so-called 'artist's artist', revered *within*, yet never a part *of*, the mainstream art world, most of whom, in Westermann's opinion 'attend too many parties and don't work'.<sup>5</sup> The recent retrospective of his work at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in 2001, has come some way to repositioning Westermann and his work,<sup>6</sup> considering him in relation to the sixties art world from which, as Minimalism came to dominate, he became more and more sidelined, and from whose story he has now been all but excluded.<sup>7</sup> My account of Westermann is less a renegotiation of the boundaries of Pop and Minimalism, Surrealism, Neo-Dada and Assemblage, than a bringing into focus of an artist always present but marginalised within contemporary artistic practice of the late fifties and sixties.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Letters from HC Westermann*, Bill Barrette ed., New York, 1988, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> This large scale travelling exhibition was the first major retrospective of Westermann's work since the 1978 show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, curated by Barbara Haskell. In 1981 a small Westermann show was held at the Serpentine Gallery, London. At the time Westermann was virtually unheard of this side of the Atlantic.

<sup>7</sup> Westermann was excluded from the art world by certain New York based writers who, with few exceptions, found Westermann too excessive, and so formally and conceptually removed from his New York counterparts that he was dismissed as an anachronistic also-ran. Most notable amongst New York based critics, however was the writing of Max Kozloff, whose catalogue essay for Westermann's 1968 show remains one of the most subtle and important discussions of Westermann's work. See Max Kozloff, *H.C. Westermann*, Los Angeles, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> The temporal complexity of the so-called 'Minimal' or 'Pop' aesthetic has been highlighted by several recent authors, particularly James Meyer, whose work has gone some way to demonstrating the range of artists who exhibited alongside the Minimalists during the early sixties. See James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, New Haven and London, 2001. The sculptural work of Westermann, first exhibited in 1956, is an interesting example of an artist who seems to be working through issues, both formal and conceptual, several years prior to their appearance 'proper' in the work of more mainstream practitioners. This temporal wheeling backward is less about tracking who did what first, but, rather, demonstrates the complexity of such a task. In a recent lecture on Barnett Newman, Michael Fried commented on what he called the 'chronological illusion' of Newman's work, in that in many ways it seems to both tackle and resolve problems of spatiality, the phenomenological encounter, vision and temporal experience before the Minimalists, seemingly situating his practice as concurrent with, or even after the fact of the Minimal project. This was a point shored up, Fried pointed out, by the fact it was the Minimalists who 'rediscovered' Newman, and insisted on his previously neglected position as an important post-war painter. Michael Fried, 'Painting Present', lecture given at Tate Modern, London, Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2002. In a similar way, I am arguing for a re-evaluation of the

Having already served in both the Second World War and the Korean war, Westermann arrived at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with two wars, a failed marriage and a career as an acrobat already behind him. Westermann had previously studied advertising and design at the Art Institute in 1947 on the popular GI Bill, returning there between 1952 and 1954 to study in the fine arts division. He was a generation older than most of his class mates, remembered as a quiet, removed character, incredibly resourceful and hardworking, and always smartly dressed. In order to support himself at art school, Westermann earned money as a handyman, working for local landlords. In 1956, two years after he graduated, Westermann showed in the 'Monument' exhibition, a revival of a 1948 tradition in which artists organised their own show in response to the Art Institute's exclusion of students from its 'Chicago and Vicinity Show'. It was at the opening for 'Monument' that Westermann first met Allan Frumkin, who was to become his dealer first in Chicago and later in New York. Westermann had his first solo exhibition at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago in 1958, a city he lived in until 1961, and where his work remains strongly represented today in both public and private collections.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter I focus on a small number of Westermann's objects and the way in which, through these objects, he converts his own highly specific, personal experiences into a finite set of generalised motifs or objects to be pieced together, reformed and recycled, in relation to the concept of bricolage. I understand this both in terms of the way in which they are put together and the way in which they are encountered by the spectator.<sup>10</sup> In *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss employs the term 'bricolage' in his structural account of the language of myth and the systems of understanding that have developed amongst so-called 'primitive' peoples. Lévi-Strauss described bricolage as a practical process differentiated

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artists under consideration in this thesis as also working through in these earlier works many of the major tenets of object-based production of the mid to late sixties.

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks to Allan Frumkin for discussing Westermann's work with me, and for showing me so many of his works now kept in Frumkin's own collection, including several gifts and toys.

<sup>10</sup> In this, my approach differs from Anna Dezeuze's work on bricolage and the 'do-it-yourself' artwork in several different ways (see my introduction to this thesis, footnote 29). Rather than an amateurish strategy Westermann's 'hobbyist' approach is here understood as a strategy of bricolage, as a kind of 'pseudo-folk' or method of piecing together and recycling that I will address in detail later in this chapter.

from empirical models of construction and knowledge-building, or 'scientific thought', in that it registers more on the intuitive, day to day compilation and recycling of materials, objects, tools, ideas—whatever is to hand. In Lévi-Strauss's terms, this practical mode of assembly and building finds its intellectual analogue in 'magical' or 'mythical' thought, a process of building, learning, developing, constructing and thinking that he claims characterises 'primitive' societies.

Lévi-Strauss opposes the work of the bricoleur to that of the 'engineer'. A crucial difference between the bricoleur and the engineer is that 'the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilisation while the 'bricoleur' by inclination or necessity always remains within them'.<sup>11</sup> Just as Westermann's working process finds his work caught up in a limited set of repeated motifs, often involving cases, boxes, imprisonment, chains and compartments, so 'mythical thought', 'the intellectual form of "bricolage"',<sup>12</sup> is also, writes Lévi-Strauss, 'imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning'.<sup>13</sup>

What Westermann played out in his work was a problem of series: the overlap and return of certain objects and themes, what Lévi-Strauss called the 'permutable' nature of the objects, images and tools with which the bricoleur works.<sup>14</sup> For Lévi-Strauss, the 'permutable' means that which is 'capable of standing in successive relations with other entities'.<sup>15</sup> Critic Dennis Adrian has written on the taxonomical difficulty of classifying Westermann's heterogeneous oeuvre, a task he at first felt necessary as he sought to introduce the art world and readers of *Art International* and *Artforum* to Westermann.<sup>16</sup> In his catalogue essay for

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<sup>11</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London, 1966, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 20. The full passage reads: 'Signs, and images which have acquired significance, may still lack comprehension; unlike concepts they do not yet possess simultaneous and theoretically unlimited relations with other entities of the same kind.'

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Dennis Adrian, 'Some Notes on H.C. Westermann', op.cit., and the exhibition he organised in 1974, *H.C. Westermann: Made in Chicago*, Washington, 1974. Also, see his 'The Art of H.C. Westermann', *Artforum*, vol.6 no. 1, September 1967, pp. 16-22, *H.C. Westermann*,

Westermann's recent retrospective, Adrian outlined the problems of categorising his objects. He claims it is the fluidity of the boundaries between the various 'persistent' categories that demonstrate what he calls Westermann's 'affinity for the paradoxical'.<sup>17</sup> To highlight this 'paradoxical' aspect of Westermann's work, Adrian proposes categories that, rather than fix definition or meaning, instead point to and encompass it. The names for the categories Adrian provides suggest medium and process as much as they do form and content. The list runs as follows: Figures/*Personnages*, Houses/Architecture/Furniture, Death Ships, Boxes, Tableaux/Vitrines, and Machines/Tools.<sup>18</sup>

Although allowing, as Adrian recommends, a certain amount of slippage or permeability between categories, I would argue that the very attempt at carrying out such a taxonomy necessarily involves exclusions and inevitably manages to isolate those objects which are absent. For example, I would propose, in addition to Adrian's list, the categories of Illustrated Letters, Personal Gifts and Wall Plaques—this list could also be expanded to incorporate Exhibition Flyers, Lithographic Prints and Miscellaneous, for which read small metal casts such as the carefully and idiosyncratically hand-crafted weights and equipment for his daily exercise regime, marked off from the merely everyday or practical by such careful crafting and embellishments. Other notable miscellany would include the small 'Batmobile' emblem he made for the front of his car and the wooden home and studio he built for his wife Joanna Beall Westermann and himself.<sup>19</sup> The slippage of groupings or series Adrian highlights are unfixable because of the overlap and shared ground (of motifs, materials, references) between them. The House works carry the echo of the *personnage*, the Death Ships imbued with traumatic incidents of warfare that spill over into the realm of the play thing, the privately exchanged gifts for friends and family, the *objet trouvé* that sneakily inserts itself into the arena of the hand-crafted and the sculptural; such is the

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London, 1981, and his recent catalogue essay 'H.C. Westermann's Sculptures, 1954-1981: Fragments of a Critical Introduction, in Dennis Adrian, Michael Rooks, Robert Storr, Lynne Warren, *HC Westermann*, Chicago, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis Adrian, *H.C. Westermann*, (2001) op.cit., p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See the essay by Michael Rooks, 'I Made a Deal with God': H.C. Westermann's House and Studio, Ibid., p. 66, for a discussion of the Brookfield Centre, Westermann's house and studio as a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk*, in which he points out 'Westermann's house was very much 'a Westermann' and, for that matter, is signed and dated'.

ongoing work of both Westermann the bricoleur and the critic who seeks to organise it from outside the bricoleur's system.

The work of the bricoleur, as Lévi-Strauss tells us, is never finished, although the objects and tools with which he or she works are. They are then put to new and alternative uses that in turn generate new or different results. However, it is less the so-called 'primitive', intuitive models of making-do and combining that interest me here, but the idea that a limited yet heterogeneous collection of tools and ideas can be clustered together, wrested apart and re-connected in order to develop something new. In Westermann's objects, the work is never fully finished but is put to other uses, with forms and motifs repeated and reconfigured. Returning to previous models in order to make something new is the 'first practical'<sup>20</sup> step of the bricoleur, what Lévi-Strauss calls a 'retrospective' activity.<sup>21</sup>

The constant re-structuring that occurs in Westermann's work should be understood not so much as a trope of seriality but in terms of this 'retrospective' action, a means of recycling past objects and encounters in order to generate something else. The point in this system of working is not simply to become something other, but to retain the previous state of being within the new incarnation, which then always carries a haunting echo of its past, seen perhaps most poignantly in the motif of the Death Ship, which I return to in greater detail toward the end of this chapter. Always on the way to becoming something else, whether a *personnage*, a box, a cabinet or a house, forms transmute into one another. There is a retrospective movement to the system, with hook lines, refrains, emblems, encounters and formal types that migrate across and between the various sculptural objects.

As well as the notion of the retrospective, another important aspect of bricolage that I want to address is privacy and the development of a secret sculptural language. Although developing a means through which to address others and make sense of the world, the process of bricolage is, essentially, a private task.

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<sup>20</sup> Lévi-Strauss, op.cit., p.18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



Lévi-Strauss writes that, although anyone can be a bricoleur, the process by which one goes about constructing meaning and routes of understanding will always be highly idiosyncratic, as:

[C]hoices made at every stage of a given project—from the original selection of tools and materials to the configurations into which they are assembled—are always different, thus lending bricolage the status of a personal and poetic language.<sup>22</sup>

This is not to say that the objects are therefore unavailable to anyone else; for although Max Kozloff describes how through the ‘obscurity of its poetic metaphors’ the work of Westermann is ‘closed’ and ‘private’, he points out that the actual stock symbols and motifs Westermann employs are very much public and recognisable. The point is, for Kozloff, that the ‘privacy’ of Westermann’s work stems precisely from the fact that he ‘has something to hide’.<sup>23</sup> Kozloff goes on to say that it is that very ‘act of withdrawal’ and ‘condition of inaccessibility’ that is made explicitly ‘focal’ in Westermann’s objects. This is a condition his objects share with the small-scale boxes of Lucas Samaras, whose work also staved off accessibility by making that ‘act of withdrawal’ that main focus. Westermann’s project, Kozloff points out, is deliberately arcane. Works such as Westermann’s *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum* from 1958 draw us not to the ‘beautiful surfaces’ of his works but to their ‘interior life’, represented by ‘mirrors, dolls’ heads, photographs, etc.’<sup>24</sup>

I will return to *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum* later, but for now, in conjunction with the private ‘poetic language’ of bricolage I want to think about another means of construction and piecing together, what Michel de Certeau calls ‘braconnage’. ‘Braconnage’, or ‘poaching’ is, like bricolage, another everyday activity, identified by Certeau as an ‘artisan-like inventiveness’.<sup>25</sup> De Certeau claims that whilst bricolage comprises a unified, fixed set of components, systematically recycled, braconnage is less schematic. It is instead ‘dispersed in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Max Kozloff, *H.C. Westermann*, op.cit., 1968, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Stephen F. Rendall trans., Berkeley, 1984, p. 174.

time; a sequence of temporal fragments not joined together but disseminated through repetitions and different modes of enjoyment, in memories and successive knowledges'.<sup>26</sup> The work of braconnage is to do with the way in which the object is encountered by another subject, how the viewer outside of the system makes sense of it in order to create their own 'mythology' or story. De Certeau argues that for the reader (or, here, for the viewer), the process of braconnage is emancipatory, providing him or her with the freedom to drift, return, repeat, neglect and branch off from the text in order to develop individual, private trajectories through the work. The text is followed, de Certeau writes, in all its

detours, drifts across the page, metamorphoses and anamorphoses of the text produced by the travelling eye, imaginary or meditative flights taking off from a few words, overlapping of spaces on the militarily organized surfaces of the text, and ephemeral dances.<sup>27</sup>

A nomadic freedom to wander in and out, across and between the various elements and parts of the work is triggered, allowing me to focus on the shark fin, the etched imprint of a naval ship, the wooden knife or glass vitrine, in whatever order, to whatever ends, my eye and imagination might drift. Rather than establish a split between the work of the bricoleur and that of the braconnneur who undoes the systematic work of bricolage, I want to retain the specificity of Westermann's own task, that between his private 'poetic language' and the way in which I encounter and interpret them, there is some shared ground.

The 'retrospective' activity of the bricoleur has been revised by literary critic Martin Roberts in relation to the work of author Michel Tournier. Roberts describes what he calls the post-modern strategy of 'autobricolage',<sup>28</sup> the process

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 174-5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Roberts has written on bricolage and 'autobricolage' in relation to the fiction of Michel Tournier. Whilst bricolage involves drawing upon the motifs and myths of Western culture in general, autobricolage describes the work of working from one's own, personal and individual repertoire of motifs, myths and emblems. It is this notion of the autobricoleur that I want to develop throughout this chapter. Roberts proposes that Tournier, by returning to his own work and recycling his own myths and motifs, engages with the self-conscious strategy of self-commemoration, putting pressure on the validity of the unique text by proposing that the copy is 'superior' to the original. Bricolage shares the cyclical nature of mythological time, whereby motifs repeat and feed upon one another. This ritual of self-commemoration establishes, claims Roberts, a 'poetics of repetition', as Tournier turns his own work into myth, becoming

through which the writer recycles his or her own earlier texts and characters in later works. In a way, the retrospective return to previous works shares something with the task of the *braconneur*, as a less schematic process of selection than the system of *bricolage*, what I suggest we might call ‘autobraconnage’. This retrospective work of the *bricoleur* (or ‘autobraconneur’, as it were) Roberts writes, involves freeing up the systematic selection of myths and motifs that comprise the *bricoleur*’s tool kit, so that the returns and repetitions of his or her ‘figures, episodes, images and themes selected and rearranged’<sup>29</sup> retain the potential to drift, detour, travel and overlap outside of a rigidly fixed system. Performed by the *bricoleur*, the activity of ‘autobraconnage’, the drifting process of the retrieval and revisiting of the *bric-a-brac* of one’s previous projects, inaugurates a process of random, almost unconscious picking over and recycling, that here takes the form of Westermann’s retrospective haunting of his own work.

Westermann’s vocabulary of hoarding encases found objects, carved emblems, figuration, biographic and wartime references in a scheme akin to the collector’s cabinet of curiosities. *Korea* evokes traditional pastimes of carpentry and woodwork yet seems to speak the contemporary language of assemblage. It incorporates elements of biography that suggest a hermetic system, a secret language comprised of a composite core of motifs which acknowledge the vernacular, shared language of contemporary America, whilst reconfiguring it into something new and distinctly individual. Westermann, as we have seen with his wooden carved Yale lock, often used one medium to evoke another. Sometimes this resignification relied on disguise and covering over, as in the marble-effect base of *The Pillar of Truth*, which I return to later, where the original wooden form has been dipped in a mix of lurid paints, to resemble marbled stone, or the laminated plywood that appears to bend and move in imitation of rope in his work *The Big Change*.<sup>30</sup> In doing this, Westermann developed a formal language comprised of an enclosed, malleable yet limited set of signs and motifs.

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increasingly autonomous, establishing a false origin story, or starting point that shares much with Westermann’s own mythic engagement with a ‘folkish’ past, speaking ultimately of only its own, enclosed mythical repertoire. See, Martin Roberts, *Michel Tournier: Bricolage and Cultural Mythology*, California, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> See chapter four for a discussion of *The Big Change*, (Ill. 4.10) in relation to Bruce Nauman’s work. Westermann completed a number of plywood laminated pieces in the early to mid sixties,

By the late fifties, many artists were employing 'non-art' materials in the construction of their works, that, whilst not necessarily drawing upon a mythic folk past of 'low' art forms in the way the Westermann did, certainly refused the so-called 'high' art finish of modernist sculptural practice. Benjamin Buchloh has recently written on what he calls the 'vernacular of amateurish bricolage'<sup>31</sup> in relation to the work of contemporary artist Thomas Hirschhorn's temporary installations and use of the ephemera and debris of everyday culture, for example his recycling of 'high art' icons such as Mondrian in his cheap and flimsy sidewalk homage-altars with phrases such as 'Go Piet!' emblazoned across them in the vernacular of the sports fan. Buchloh outlines Hirschhorn's use of corny slogans, throwaway constructions and the kitsch remnants of everyday life in terms of its being a kind of strategy of amateurism that Hirschhorn has developed in response to the condition of sculptural practice at the end of the twentieth century. Buchloh understands this tactic in terms of its status as institutional critique, for the sites Hirschhorn uses are outside of the spaces of the gallery, placed instead on the street, sometimes presented as a garage sale, or celebrating the cults of celebrity and consumerism figured through the personal affects of an individual homage or slangy slogan.

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such as *Antimobile* and *The Rope Tree*. Both of these works, like *The Big Change*, play with our expectations of what wood can 'do' as a medium, as Westermann has planed and carved the works into forms that suggest that the hard resistant wood has somehow drooped, melted or twisted into knots. Kozloff has written interestingly about these works, calling them 'point of view' objects, (Kozloff, op.cit., p. 9). Although fascinating pieces, the laminate works form a discrete aspect of Westermann's output, that exceed the remit of my argument in this chapter that is necessarily exclusive in the objects it takes as its focus.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, 'Detritus and Decrepitude: The Sculpture of Thomas Hirschhorn', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 24, no.2, 2001, pp. 41-56, p. 47. For example, Buchloh has written about the bricolage of contemporary artist Thomas Hirschhorn in relation to the institutional critique his site-specific works engage in. Unlike Westermann's strategy of bricolage, however, Hirschhorn's choice of materials remains within the remit of detritus, the stuff that has been discarded by others. He sets up his 'displays' by rubbish bins, on stalls in jumble sales, or on street corners, as with the series of *homages* he created in honour of Modernism's heroic and tragic figures. I would argue that the difference between the deployment of the everyday vernacular both Westermann and Hirschhorn use is that, whilst Hirschhorn's works recycle junk and the discarded, Westermann's corpus of material tends to be carefully crafted and selected—only referring to the everyday, not really incorporating it. The materials and sites of display for Westermann's works do not engage with a critique of the reification of the art object in the way Buchloh argues Hirschhorn does.

Westermann's work shares with Hirschhorn a language of the vernacular, of the everyday recycled and recuperated in various different ways. However, as we have seen, Westermann's materials do not tend to be discarded or exhausted. Westermann's motifs, carved in wood, hand-crafted and individual, seem somehow outdated, or rarefied. At the same time they might be read in terms of social critique, evoking a kind of 'nostalgia' in his deployment of the amateurish vernacular of the soda bottle, the automobile, the incorporation of cast-tin figures, and his ever-present romance with the sea, skewed to read as both symbol of Westermann's personal experience and as political critique of American Cold War policy. The America, or, rather, nostalgic Americana of Westermann's work, so vehemently refused by his Pop contemporaries, does not point in the direction of pop culture, or contemporary life. Westermann is clearly incorporating such emblems, but, then, that is the task of the bricoleur, to draw upon that which lies closest to hand, working within a language of making-do and availability.

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I am using the term 'assemblage' in this chapter, not simply to invoke the category of the 'assemblage' object, as it became known in relation to sculptural practice in the late fifties and early sixties, but also to connote certain processes of construction that have more to do with the model of 'bricolage' I am developing here. The term 'assemblage' gained currency in New York, with MoMA's 'The Art of Assemblage' show in 1961, in which Westermann was included, and art dealer Leo Castelli's championing of those artists he represented as 'assemblage' artists.<sup>32</sup> 'Assemblage' came to stand for works of art incorporating *objets trouvés*, collaging elements of the world into reliefs and three-dimensional structures. In the case of Westermann's strategy of bricolage, Deleuze and Guattari's description of the conceptual assemblage as a 'multiplicity', that does not signify in itself, but only in relation to those other assemblages it functions 'in connection with', is a more appropriate model of 'assemblage'. This model privileges heterogeneity, concepts with no beginning or end, as interconnected

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<sup>32</sup> For example the large burlap and steel wall reliefs of Lee Bontecou and the crushed metal mounds of John Chamberlain, both of which are discussed in chapter two.

and functioning always in relation to another.<sup>33</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's model of assemblage is, they write, 'deterritorialized'—it means only in relation to other things, that in themselves have multiple uses or meanings. The same process of 'deterritorialization' occurs across Westermann's heterogeneous output, where the levelling out of different media means that wood can stand for rope, oil paint can stand for marble, wood painted silver can stand for metal, and the outmoded practices of carpentry and craft skills can also be viable as contemporary sculptural practices. That Deleuze and Guattari refer to those 'concepts' as a 'tool box' perhaps goes some way to clarifying what I hope to draw out of this reading of Westermann's objects.<sup>34</sup>

Assemblage is always in a state of becoming in which means become ends and ends become means, or, in Lévi-Strauss's terminology 'the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa'.<sup>35</sup> It is this shuffling around which structures Westermann's task as bricoleur. Instead, however, of the concepts and intellectual ideas of the engineer, which share much with Deleuze and Guattari's model of assemblage, the units Westermann works with are the three-dimensional objects and items, including those biographic incidents now crystallised into a set of objects and motifs, his wood and metal craft, as well as the random objects and items he collects along the way. The 'deterritorializing' aspect of assemblage points, in Westermann's case, to the surprising and often unintentional results that the work of bricolage can produce. Lévi-Strauss describes the way in which the end result is always inevitably at a remove from the original aim in terms of the Surrealist concept of 'objective hazard',<sup>36</sup> invoking an element of chance that expands the possibilities of the bricoleur's range through the unexpected results of such juxtapositions. This means that the bricoleur achieves not only, or merely, the 'accomplishment and execution'<sup>37</sup> of his or her tasks, but also unconscious chance encounters between different elements, producing unexpected results. This is what Westermann would describe as the 'great, wonderful, mysterious,

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<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi trans., London, 1988. See chapter one 'Introduction: Rhizomes' where the authors map out their model of writing and investigation.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Lévi-Strauss, op.cit., p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

intangible' work of the 'practitioner',<sup>38</sup> that expands the 'limited possibilities'<sup>39</sup> of the pre-established repertoire the bricoleur works with.

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Although it is through Westermann's 1964 box *Secrets* that his working strategy is most explicitly enacted, it is an early group of box works from 1958 that provide another kind of mythic inauguration of Westermann's bricolage project, made one year prior to his entry onto the New York art scene in Peter Selz's 'New Images of Man' show at MoMA. These works each deploy a house motif, from fantastic rocket-shaped towers to small, log cabin style homes, ranging from the contemporary sci-fi depictions of futuristic lifestyles to a nostalgia for traditional mid-western values of homeliness and security.<sup>40</sup> In these works are found many of the motifs and elements that go on to provide the tool box from which Westermann's future assemblages, colours, juxtapositions, objects and themes were comprised.

*Mysteriously Abandoned New Home* (Ill. 3.5) is a hexagonal rocket-shaped tower with the windows and door boarded up and wooden crosses nailed to the frames. As with *Angry Young Machine* of the same year, this house is also mounted on castor wheels, as though a kind of deflationary gesture, countering the monumentality of large-scale, abstract modernist sculpture. The portability of sculpture is typically associated with rather whimsical, less 'serious' works of art, such as Alexander Calder's hanging mobiles. When David Smith mounted *Wagon II* on wheels, six years after *Mysteriously Abandoned New Home*, they lost the singular strength and solidity of his previous works, becoming, as Alex Potts

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<sup>38</sup> *Letters from H.C. Westermann*, op.cit., p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Lévi-Strauss, op.cit., p. Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> See Timothy J Garvey, 'Mysteriously Abandoned New Home: Architecture as Metaphor in the Early Sculpture of H.C. Westermann', *American Art*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Spring, 1996, pp. 43-63. Garvey makes an interesting analysis of Westermann's 'houses' in terms of the housing crisis that emerged as house prices soared in post-war Chicago. Ex-servicemen were encouraged to take advantage of Chicago's First Federal Savings offers to GI's, enabling them to purchase their own homes. Garvey points out how 'foreign' this desire to be a homeowner must have seemed to Westermann, then living in a cramped basement apartment in Chicago and concerned solely with supporting himself and finding enough money for rent, food and his art supplies.

has pointed out 'awkward and ludicrous'.<sup>41</sup> Referred to by Smith in grandiose, aggressive terms as his 'iron chariots'<sup>42</sup> or 'monsters on wheels',<sup>43</sup> the end result of his wheel mounted works results instead in their appearing, as Potts describes them, 'like toy dogs on wheels'.<sup>44</sup>

Westermann's moveable home, made of pine, birch, vermilion and redwood and standing at over one metre high, is a sparse, strange construct, itself a fairly ludicrous object. The concept of its being habitable is contradicted by the cross-armed demon angrily standing guard over the barred entrance, whilst the boarded windows further complicate the situation. The suggestion that something unspeakable has occurred is evoked by this grimacing demon, who, protecting the entrance, and only route into this work, finds its metaphoric silence echoed in the blank and boarded up windows—the only other way into understanding what Kozloff called the 'interior life' of the sculpture.<sup>45</sup> In one of the top windows a question mark is painted, an early appearance of the form Westermann was to recycle later in several laminated and marbled wood pieces, hanging over the work as though questioning its very status. By incorporating punctuation marks into the object Westermann suggests that the box functions as a kind of visual poetic language, articulated through the various oddments and motifs hoarded together that paradoxically appear to be, in the case of this abandoned, boarded up house, curtailed or silenced.

Another 'mysterious' house-box of the same year, exhibited in Selz's show, is *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum* (Ill. 3.6). Made from Douglas fir plywood and pine, this object bricolages together tar, enamel, glass, antique brass, a cast doll's head, metal, mirror and stuck-on decoupage, itself a kind of outmoded, two-dimensional bricolage. This collection of materials, ranging from the exclusive and refined sphere of expensive woods to the eclectic collection of odds and ends that adorn it, comprise a work where the structural framework highlights artistic craftwork and 'traditional' skill whilst at the same time employing cheap trinkets

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<sup>41</sup> Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, New Haven and London, 2000, p. 174.

<sup>42</sup> David Smith, as quoted in *Ibid.*, p.174.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> Potts, *op.cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Kozloff, *op.cit.*, p. 6.



and bric-a-brac that speak rather of the vernacular, amateurish hoarder and re-use of whatever lies near to hand.

Selz described this box's primary purpose as 'illusion'.<sup>46</sup> I would describe it instead as mythology, of the false promise of a story that the language of Westermann's bricolage seems to teeter on the brink of articulating. The interior of the box is a catalogue of dead-ends and illusionistic short-circuits, such as the staircase inside that leads nowhere, a mirror that renders one's appearance three-eyed. On one interior wall hangs a wooden crucifix, floating ghosts and cut-out newspaper clippings featuring a dead soldier. On the staircase is a small wooden gallows dramatically lit by the shaft of light one of the viewing ports provides, whilst nearby is found a cast skull and crossbones stuck to the wall atop the cut-out picture of the legs of a circus lady. Outside on the tower is stamped a handless clock, marking on its face the arrested temporality of this mausoleum.

This curious series of juxtapositions engenders a disjointed mode of viewing that is reinforced by the brightness of the colour and the 'folksy' mode of construction, as our eye flits and drifts from one element to another. This box encompasses a cornucopia of contradictions and surprises that demand it not be taken at face value. The mausoleum is made of expensive, skilfully carpentered wood which has in turn been coated in bright yellow paint. *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum* is structured around those same issues of concealment and contradiction as the multi-layered boxes of Samaras and inside-out appearance of Bontecou's reliefs, but it lacks an attendant physical threat. Instead, Westermann's works focus much more on that aspect of wrong-footing addressed in chapter one, although to rather different ends.

In *Mysteriously Abandoned New Home*, Westermann chose to retain the natural state of wooden construction, waxed to a glossy sheen and skilfully carpentered with tight joints and expertly finished edges. When, in another context, for example *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum*, the choice is made to paint over the carefully worked wooden exterior surfaces, and, as a consequence to conceal the

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Selz, *New Images of Man*, New York, 1959, p. 141.

object's element of skilled labour, its appearance instead points elsewhere, to the ersatz, the amateurish and the more crudely assembled structure of the hobbyist. As I have shown, the manipulation of the surfaces and medium of his work, where wood stands for silver and paint for marble stone, was not uncommon in Westermann's work. Neatly demonstrated in the silver painted *Untitled (Oil Can)* (Ill. 3.7) from 1962, is that levelling out of differences between media. An 'oil can' has been fashioned from galvanised sheet metal and placed on top of a pine box, from which loops a thick length of hemp rope, fixed to the box with a metal loop that has been bolted to the side. From the spout of the oil can hangs another thick twist of rope, from the oil needed to lubricate his welded and hinged structures, to the wooden box so central to his carpentered works, to the ever-present motif of thick rope that speaks of the workshop as much as it does the ship deck and Naval knot, the tools of Westermann's trade are here brought together in this wood and metal object.

The futility of ever fully knowing what the contents of *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum* might be, ensures that looking at this work will always be a frustrating business. The partial aspect the viewer is afforded is always going to be severely limited. The result, in Westermann's case, however, is not the physical damage that Samaras's boxes threaten, but something more like a teasing frustration or disappointment. The range of symbols and objects available to us foil attempts to piece together any semblance of narrative drive as we roam and drift across, picking and choosing, performing the role of the braconneur. The elements that make up Westermann's objects can be compared with what Abraham and Torok describe as 'broken symbols', fragments of the analysand's discourse that tell only part of the whole story, that lack the necessary counterparts that would permit their completion, and reveal their hidden secrets.<sup>47</sup> Instead, these 'broken symbols' are left to be repeated, recycled, yet never resolved.

The promise of narrative resolution or closure is always thwarted, as though the answer may lie in the underlying structure of the work that we cannot access.

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<sup>47</sup> See Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolfman's Magic Word*, Nicholas Rand trans. Minneapolis, 1986, p. 79.

Kozloff describes the objects in these works as Westermann's 'anti-narratives' that nevertheless negotiate 'an almost involuntary covenant between artist and spectator'.<sup>48</sup> As John Perreault claimed, 'the stories [Westermann] tells are very contemporary, very disjointed, and very full of discontinuities. And, in fact, what you, the viewer, have to do is finish the story yourself; fill in the blanks and the detail'.<sup>49</sup> When describing the construction of his house and adjoining studio, a lovingly constructed wooden building that has been described by Michael Rooks as the ultimate 'Westermann' object, Westermann highlights the importance of the underlying structure of the construct, the way in which it is pieced together. He wrote '[o]f course with this house the most important aspect [...] is what you don't see, in a sense. By that I mean the basic framework, or structure, as you wish'.<sup>50</sup> It is what we *don't see* in Westermann's objects that interests me here. The underlying structure might provide the glue by which the various disparate elements adhere together in order to begin to make sense or 'speak'. The process, that is, of bricolage; Westermann's 'basic framework'.

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Selz's 'New Images of Man' show, Westermann's first exhibition in New York only a few years after graduating from art school, proved to be controversial and was widely-panned. The carefully crafted nature of his seemingly whimsical, capricious objects generated a source of anxiety amongst New York based critics keen to dismiss Westermann by promoting what Dennis Adrian describes as a 'Popeye the Sailor-Yankee Whittler'<sup>51</sup> stereotype. Selz included three of Westermann's works in the show, *Evil New War God (S.O.B.)* (Ill. 3.8), 1958, *Angry Young Machine* (Ill. 3.9), 1959, and his large wooden piece, *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea* (Ill. 3.10 and Ill. 3.11), from 1958. The inclusion of these works is explained by Selz through reference to Westermann's war-time experiences, as a commentary on contemporary life which is 'a succinct

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<sup>48</sup> Kozloff, op.cit., p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> John Perreault, 'H.C. Westermann', *MCA Alumnae Journal*, Moore College of Art Alumnae Association, Winter 1973, pp. 6-8, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters from HC Westermann*, p. 135.

<sup>51</sup> Adrian, *H.C. Westermann*, (2001). op.cit., p. 37.

view of the world which has become a madhouse'.<sup>52</sup> Selz's interpretation of these works focuses on the shape of Westermann's shiny brass personage *Evil New War God (S.O.B.)*, which Selz claims refers to the blockhouse, and the bottle tops that adorn *Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea*, which, for Selz, refer to the makeshift homes the Koreans are said to have built out of the empty beer cans and other refuse left behind by the American soldiers.

*Evil New War God (S.O.B.)* is a partially chrome-plated brass sculpture, standing forty-two centimetres high. It is made up of strips of metal screwed together horizontally to create an angular lower portion, complete with petite cast-metal feet and small hook-hand attachment, on top of which is placed a larger, wider square box, into which have been shaped two eyes and a mouth, with the metal strips melded to form the features, and the nose formed by a three-dimensional triangle of metal fixed to the centre. Three small scratches between the 'eyes' suggest tension, a screwed up forehead or an angry, 'evil' expression, as the title of the piece indicates. Along a middle strip of metal in the lower portion is stamped the American motto IN GOD WE TRUST; on the back of the upper 'head' portion the letters S.O.B, standing for another, vernacular phrase, 'son of a bitch'. *Evil New War God (S.O.B.)* embodies an almost childish, toy-like charm, with its shaped features and little feet, oversized head and boxy body, it is more reminiscent of a play thing than serious art work, humorous toy not political comment, and yet it seems to evoke a little of each of these things.

*Angry Young Machine* from 1959, is another 'angry' work of art that speaks the language of bricolage by bringing together the bric-a-brac of the workshop and the artist's studio. It is a wood, iron and aluminium piece, another *personnage* of sorts, a curved, bulbous bust, complete with bright red painted lips with tongue unfurling away from the head, on top of which rests a tall tower, with pointed spire, windows and entrance. The assemblage/*personnage* is fixed to a set of galvanised pipe fittings, with tap, u-bend and joints, screwed to a square base set on wheels. The piece is painted silver, meant to lend the plywood form the appearance of metal. Formally, *Angry Young Machine* contains more trademark

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<sup>52</sup> Selz, op.cit., p. 145.

'Westermann' elements than its chrome-plated brass counterpart *Evil New War God* (S.O.B). For the most part, Westermann worked with wood, from cheap laminated plywood to woods such as redwood, pine, and mahogany. These were either highly finished pieces, or were painted: silver to suggest metal, or bright, primary colours, such as the red-lipped features of *Angry Young Machine*. The mechanisation of anger evoked in this war-like machine is countered by the profile of a male head resembling Westermann depicted on the side of the work. It too sticks out its tongue, but this drawn head is spitting out nuts and bolts, and from the back of this angry head a jet of steam is set off, a comical humanisation of the angry machine. On the base of the personage is an ornate wooden bridge, on which stands a tiny female figure. Upon one of the pipe-fittings sits a carved wooden bird, as the menacing, mechanical machine encroaches upon the human, on nature and romance, the anti-war message oddly tinged in this raspberry-blowing emblem of anger with a unsettling layer of whimsy. The parts do not add up to a whole, the additional elements sit, rather, as glaring 'broken symbols' that defy narrative or explanation.

Standing almost one and a half metres from the ground, *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea* is another personage, a free-standing pine cabinet with a door that opens to reveal an interior space, divided by a shelf in the middle, the entire surface of which has been covered with soda bottle tops. On top of the main 'body' of the work is a brightly painted rectangular head, with one eye and an open, gaping mouth. From the top shelf of *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea* hangs a wooden maquette of a figure, suspended upside-down, in the position of an acrobat mid-routine, a motif referencing Westermann's brief career as part of a two-man acrobat team that toured naval ships in 1946. Next to the balancing acrobat stands the similarly brightly painted cast-tin figure of a baseball player, bat raised, about to strike.

The player in *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea*, however, is headless, and the blind strike he is about to take risks hitting the smiling acrobat who hangs so close by. Dennis Adrian tells us, somewhat unconvincingly, that this is Westermann's re-enactment of a scene from Homer's *Odyssey*, where the Greeks escape the cave of one-eyed Polyphemus by getting him drunk and then

blinding him, so that he can only flail aimlessly as they flee, here reconfigured in the contemporary figure of the blind batsman whose swing can never be true, and repeated on the outside of the box, which also has only one eye.<sup>53</sup> Along the front of the shelf dividing the busy top half from the lower portion have been stamped the words 'A MAD CABINETMAKER MIGHT', a jokey reference that confirms Westermann's role as craftsman, whilst also possibly suggesting himself as the headless player who 'might' take a swing, or as the swinging acrobat that stands for his previous job. Instead of resolving, the statement stands, rather, as an odd phrase situated uneasily between a half-finished question and an answer. At the bottom of the second shelf is the carved wooden form of a ship, half sunk into the base of the work. The ship barely registers on first glance at the chaotic interior of this jumbled assortment of bric-a-brac, yet it serves to punctuate the object once it has been grasped. Our attention caught, the upper portion of the box slowly starts to come undone and the suggestion of a narrative structure starts to reveal itself.

Inside of the door of *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea* are found the letters H C W, spelt out in bottle tops, inserting the person of Westermann squarely into the work. When closed, the cabinet stands as genderless *personnage*, arms bent at the 'hips', with the single eye and gaping red mouth suggesting a silent exclamation of surprise, or shock. Inside the open mouth a stick-like figure is seen, arms held out as though dancing or jumping—a cry for help or a shout for joy. Once our attention is arrested this strange, complex work, at first glance a fairly crude wooden figure of sorts, begins to reveal its many secrets. On top of the head rests one yellow painted finger, pointing upwards, on top of which rests a small globe. The suggestion of a hairline exposes itself at the same time as the turrets of a castle, the castellated square punctuated at each corner by a phallic finger. With its bright colours, sturdy structure and open mouth, the impression of this work is at once a kind of pin-ball machine, dollhouse, secret box and figurative object. This cabinet of curiosities, with its eclectic array of mismatched bric-a-brac, from the junk of everyday Americana, to its sinister depiction of a sinking Death Ship, functions somewhere between

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<sup>53</sup> Adrian, *H.C. Westermann*, (2001), op.cit., p. 41.

tableau of modern life, biographical emblem (with references to Westermann's career as an acrobat, marriage to a dancer in Shanghai and his Naval experiences), and ridiculous toy. It is almost jarring in its brightness, its deployment of materials, as a hokey, hand-crafted 'thing', out of place in the art world of which it is a part.

This gaudy, cyclops *personnage* seemed raucous to New York visitors to 'New Images of Man', their artistic sensibilities formed in response to the grandiloquent large-scale gestures of the New York School of abstract-expressionist painting. Westermann's works were shown alongside an eclectic range of paintings and sculptures, from the bronze, clunky figures of Leonard Baskin, the roughly-hewn, fragmented, welded iron forms of César, the coarse, scratchy, graffiti-like *art brut* paintings and reliefs of Dubuffet, the abstract painting of Jackson Pollock's 1951 black and white paintings, and de Kooning's *Woman* series. The show was considered an anachronism, out of step with contemporary concerns and embroiled in existential angst that did not sit well with current interests. Westermann's work was particularly badly received, with one of his only favourable reviews written by former curator of modern art at the Art Institute of Chicago, Katherine Kuh, to whom Westermann was not such an aberration.<sup>54</sup> Kuh praised Westermann's presentation of an unsettling image of ourselves, highlighting the black humour that accompanies so much of his work.<sup>55</sup> Manny Farber's review 'New Images of (ugh) Man', whilst dismissive of the show as a whole, offers a reading of Westermann's work that seems to tap into the kind of bricolage project he is engaging in, writing 'Westermann's entertaining examples of pseudo-folk art (men built from boxes and metal strips) have a tattoo artist's capacity for creating interesting sights out of the corniest, picayune details'.<sup>56</sup> The most scathing notice, however, came from critic John Canaday, who claimed that Westermann's

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<sup>54</sup> Although the show was roundly criticised in the art press, most critics singled out Westermann's work in their scathing reviews. Chapter four will address the way in which Westermann's works seemed so aberrant to his New York viewers who were unaware of the art scene developing both on the West coast and in Chicago.

<sup>55</sup> Kuh comments on the 'welcome though macabre humor of the young Chicago artist [...] providing us with a disquieting new vision of ourselves'. Katherine Kuh, 'Disturbing Are These "New Images of Man"', *Saturday Review*, October 24, 1959, pp. 48-49.

<sup>56</sup> Manny Farber, 'New Images of (ugh) Man', *Artnews* 58, no. 6, October 1959, pp. 38-39, 58, p. 39.

stale Dada concoctions add nothing to a movement that made its contributions long ago. Westermann offers a “succinct view of the world which has become a madhouse”, according to the catalogue. For me, he is just a guest who arrived in a clown suit, forty years late for a costume party, to find a formal dinner in progress.<sup>57</sup>

Canaday's refusal to see Westermann as anything other than an embarrassing anachronism, whilst particularly harsh, was by no means unique. More interesting, however, are those reviews that understand the folkish nature of Westermann's works as deliberate and strategic. When reviewing Westermann's solo exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 1968, Stacy Moss focused on *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea*, pointing to the difficulty that viewers have in wresting information from Westermann's work.<sup>58</sup> Moss appears to reject the assumption put forward by Selz that Westermann's objects such as these *personnages* are comments on contemporary conceptions of 'Man'. She asks whether they should be understood instead in terms of existential satire or simply as gags with no punch line, irreverent and institutional jokes that persist as irrational, 'a kind of emotional fish-hook, snagged in the memory',<sup>59</sup> unforgettable, inexplicable images that haunt the viewer as a joke they cannot fully grasp.

Westermann's harsh treatment at the hands of these New York critics may have been due to Westermann's dislocation from his Chicago base where conformity to the New York School model was less an issue. It may be, however, that there was a more fundamental problem with these reviewers looking for the wrong 'clues' to his work. What is clear, however, is that something in Westermann's work was excessive. It appeared vulgar, 'folksy', naïve and too dadaesque for critics to take seriously, although Farber comes close to identifying something like a *strategy* of nostalgia and the 'pseudo-folk' aspect of his work which, for Canaday was simply unforgivable.

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<sup>57</sup> John Canaday, 'Art: New Images of Man', *New York Times*, September 30, 1959.

<sup>58</sup> Stacy Moss, 'Fishhooks in the Memory', *Time*, December 20, 1968, pp. 66-69, p. 66.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.



Westermann's 'nostalgia' is steeped in a tradition that is just as mythic as the 'tales' it seeks to tell. This mythic construct serves a dual purpose in Westermann's work. As a strategy of artistic practice it bestows upon these objects a 'past tradition', a means of inserting them within the history of art, implying a lineage with its origins in 'folk art', or what Farber referred to as 'pseudo-folk'. Westermann's most often-cited predecessor, Polish-American Elie Nadelman's clunky wooden vaudeville figures were also described in these terms, and Westermann dedicated one of his works to the artist.<sup>60</sup> The homespun whimsy and folk-like charm that the early Modernist sculptures by Nadelman embrace is, however, far removed from Westermann's strategy of 'pseudo-folk'.

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A year after making *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea*, Westermann constructed another assemblage/*personnage* entitled *Brinkmanship*, from 1959, an awkward object that addresses American Cold War policy, a critique spoken in the language of recycled objects and amateurish bricolage. Pieced together from separate sections, *Brinkmanship* (Ill. 3.12) is made from plywood and metal, resting on a wooden base, onto which is screwed a wooden relief profile of a male head resembling Westermann. The mouth has a hinge screwed to it, suggesting mobility and freedom of speech, which is an illusion, since it is fixed closed and silenced, with the head firmly attached to the base. A large metal ballcock has been fixed to the crucifix of metal piping rising from the centre of the base, and at the extremities of the horizontal bar are two crudely shaped metal hands, suggesting the unsophisticated figure of a person. The figure holds an American car, which has been hung between the two hands by a piece of string. On the ball a face has been scratched and moulded, smoking a cigar, with an American eagle on the head and a Pepsi-Cola bottle top on the forehead. David McCarthy's

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<sup>60</sup> *Homage to Elie Nadelman* (1966) is a Douglas fir and ash sculpture, comprising a wooden base with a tall section of wood fixed upright to the base from which is suspended an antique shovel handle, which Westermann has carved his 'signature' anchor mark to. Instead of a shovel at the bottom, Westermann has stuck a ball of laminated redwood and to the side of the upright section is a small cast lead replica of the shovel. The shovel and dustpan were forms that featured also in Westermann's series of metal and carved wooden handle *Dust Pan* series of objects, although, in this instance, the shovel cannot be used for shovelling, due to the ball. Adrian writes that in his homage to Nadelman, rather than quote directly, Westermann instead chose to address Nadelman's unconventional use of materials and 'impeccable' craftsmanship. (Adrian, p. 48).

detailed reading of this work analyses each of the constitutive elements of the piece, as he conducts a reading in relation to the American Cold War policy of the same name, whereby via diplomatic and other devices, the enemy is pushed to the brink of warfare, although with cooperation as the goal, not actual engagement.<sup>61</sup> As a contentious and high-risk policy, brinkmanship engendered a political climate of hostility and paranoia in 1950s America, that, whilst no doubt an element of the work, does not quite explain it fully.

McCarthy's reading works a little too well for me. Based, as it is in the most part, upon the work's title, this is a systematic breakdown of its individual constituent parts that, when pieced together, present a rather less resolved reading. It is the intractability or 'secrecy' of the work that is the point of origin in my (partial, biased, selective) story of H.C. Westermann's objects. Undoubtedly, Westermann's work is about war, and America, but it is also about something that skews such readings, in order that the very issue of 'reading' or meaning be put under pressure, and it is this very point that the likes of Selz and those reviewers dismissive of Westermann's work miss.

What interests me in *Brinkmanship* is the structural process by which a Pepsi Cola bottle top, a piece of string, a crudely scratched face and ballcock might be held together, that is, where the 'glue' is the idea of bricolage itself rather than a narrative to be retrieved through piecing it all together. The demand to 'understand' through a series of logical readings in which a Pepsi bottle top is a signifier for America consumerism, and the eagle an emblem of America—a kind of sifting of evidence for information—is less important here, than a model whereby these things might be brought together. As well as being called a 'Surrealist', and 'assemblage artist', Westermann is often placed under the label 'neo-dada', although his work has consistently managed to elide specific categorisation. Westermann, whilst idiosyncratic in his choice of technique, does however share important ground with many other artists, specifically West coast

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<sup>61</sup> David McCarthy, 'H.C. Westermann's *Brinkmanship*', *American Art*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Fall, 1996, pp. 50-69.

artists such as George Herms, Wallace Berman and Bruce Conner.<sup>62</sup> The important distinction between these artists' work and Westermann's is the way in which each engages with the ephemeral and vernacular environment in which they work. Whilst Westermann certainly draws upon contemporary culture and everyday objects, the aim of his work was not the temporary and casual, nor did he seek to challenge the status of three-dimensional sculpture.

Certain motifs Westermann shares with other artists are the soda bottle, the gas station and the automobile, (or 'antimobile' as he punned in his 1963 laminated plywood work of the same title), emblems of a newly mobile America. However, the way in which Westermann chose to deploy the soda bottle and gas station differs in important ways from his Pop and so-called 'neo-dada' peers. While Oldenburg was roughly moulding a Coca Cola bottle from plaster, and painting it in matt, blocky strokes, and Rauschenberg was placing empty, paint-stained bottles inside his wooden vertical unit in *The Coca Cola Plan*, and Warhol was endlessly repeating its form, imperfectly, across a number of two-tone silk screen prints, Westermann was lovingly carving, planing and sanding his from wood. His use of the Coca Cola bottle, a mock homage to the deification of Coca Cola, and all that it stood for during the Cold War as emblem of the successes of capitalism and the 'American way of life', functions in a rather different way to his Pop and Neo-Dada contemporaries.<sup>63</sup> In *Pillar of Truth* (Ill. 3.13) the bottle, made from wood, yet painted silver as though cast in precious metal, is mounted on a fluted wooden pedestal, whose undulating surface echoes that of the

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<sup>62</sup> Westermann has also been grouped with the 'Monster Roster' group of Chicago artists such as Leon Golub and Cosmo Campoli and the later Chicago-based 'Hairy Who' artists such as Jim Knutt. Both Robert Storr and Lynne Warren discuss the various affiliations and influences attributed to Westermann, highlighting the instability of such groupings. For example, the so-called 'Hairy Who' group of artists, including Jim Knutt, had not even begun studying at the S.A.I.C by the time Westermann left in 1961. Warren also points out that most of Westermann's drawings were unknown at the time, as they were predominantly private correspondences, and were therefore unlikely sources of inspiration for that generation of artists. See Lynne Warren, 'Right Where I Live': H.C. Westermann's American Experience', in *H.C. Westermann*, (2001), op.cit. More cynically, one could say there was a collective phenomenon to make careers out of idiosyncrasy.

<sup>63</sup> At this time, Robert Arneson also made a series of ceramic soda bottles, which he displaced in a block, as though an unpacked consignment, although the roughly hewn surfaces and lurid coating of paints that drip down the side, whilst carefully crafted in a traditional material, shares much with Westermann's own engagement with the everyday in *The Pillar of Truth*. I return to Arneson's work in chapter four, specifically his series of homage works featuring Westermann's image.

signature barrelled bottle of Coca Cola. The fluted base of this homage has been dipped in a bath of lurid paints, transforming the wooden form into the suggestion of a marbled classical pillar. The title of the piece, *Pillar of Truth*, is an ironic twist on the company's slogan 'It's the *real* thing'.<sup>64</sup>

*Trophy for a Gasoline Station* (Ill. 3.14) from 1961 again puns on the similar forms of the Coca Cola bottle and the classical pillar, although this time the object placed at the top of the 'trophy' is another emblem of American consumerism: the automobile. A wooden car, again painted 'silver', teeters at the tip of the pedestal, its expansive fins and long body an emblem of that society encapsulated in the excesses of automobile design of the time. In 1962, one year before Westermann's *Trophy for a Gasoline Apollo*, West coast artist Ed Ruscha took a series of photographs of gasoline stations. Unlike Westermann, for whom the commitment to traditional, hand-made objects provided the mainstay of his working strategy, Ruscha claimed he did not want 'nuances of the hand-made and crafted' in his *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*.<sup>65</sup> He was not after the nostalgic, the poignant, nor even the interesting. He said 'I'm not even interested in Americana [...] I took sixty or seventy photographs of gas stations between here and Oklahoma City. Well the eccentric stations were the first ones I threw out. I didn't want to have the look of variety to it'.<sup>66</sup> Although working at the opposite end of the scale to Westermann's working practice, Ruscha was far from ambivalent about him, acknowledging Westermann's influence in Los Angeles during the sixties, saying 'he made a real impression on people'.<sup>67</sup> In 1997, Ruscha demonstrated the extent to which his own work is inflected by Westermann, by incorporating his image in his silk-screen print *Bloated Empire* (Ill. 3.15), which featured a large profile of Westermann's head, adapted from

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<sup>64</sup> See Sidra Stich, *Made in the USA: An Americanization in Modern Art, the '50s and '60s*, Berkeley, 1987, particularly the chapter on 'American Food and Marketing' in which Westermann's use of the Coca Cola bottle is discussed in relation to other artists working with emblems of American consumerism, such as Wayne Thiebaud, Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, etc.

<sup>65</sup> Ed Ruscha, as quoted in John Coplans, 'Concerning *Various Small Fires*: Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications', [1965], reprinted in Ed Ruscha *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, Alexandra Schwartz ed., Cambridge, Mass., 2002, p. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Ed Ruscha, as quoted in Douglas M. Davis, 'From Common Sense, Mr. Ruscha Evokes Art', [1969], reprinted in *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> Ruscha, as quoted in Paul Karlstrom, 'Interview with Edward Ruscha in his Western Avenue, Hollywood Studio', [1981], reprinted in *Ibid.*, p. 182.

Westermann's own caricature of himself as it appeared in so many of his own drawings, prints and illustrated letters. This image of Westermann that Ruscha includes here is taken directly from an illustrated thank-you letter sent to him by Westermann in 1972, which features Westermann in his typical guise as dapper, white tuxedo-clad dandy, hand extended, marching along an abandoned port, complete with approaching kamikaze plane. Rather than Ruscha simply paying lip-service to the impact of Westermann's work on the West-coast in general, in *Bloated Empire* Ruscha pays homage in the most enduring and intimate way, by directly including not merely an image of Westermann, but Westermann's own work, right at the centre of his work. In chapter four, I address the reasons why Westermann seems to invite such personal acts of homage, particularly why his presence is so keenly felt by other artists such as Ruscha and, as we shall see, Bruce Nauman, whose series of works referencing Westermann provide the focus for this concluding chapter.

Whilst the Coca Cola bottles that Rauschenberg used were the detritus of that consumer society, in Westermann's work the bottle retains the potential for its recycling. Although the bottles in Rauschenberg's combine are, also, quite literally, 'recycled' objects, we see them at the end of their life, exhausted as it were, the ephemera of a society consumed with the wrappings, packaging and junk of its own making, a rather different strategy to that of Westermann. The point is, it is not *what* Westermann is recycling in his objects, that is, the soda bottle, the motor car, the reference to the gasoline station, but the means by which he performs that process of recycling as somehow redemptive and ongoing, which structures his project of bricolage. That he carves and planes the bottles from wood distances his project from the junk aesthetic of Rauschenberg, imbuing it with that sense of nostalgia Ruscha was so keen to empty his work of, the traditional labour of the carpenter oddly juxtaposed with the ersatz, throw-away, excessive consumer culture that the Coca Cola bottle, gas station and automobile embody.

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Just as bricolage itself encompasses a wide range of heterogeneous, private motifs and languages, so the word 'bricolage' has also been ascribed various definitions in different languages, many of which point to a process of deviation, or drifting off-course. Lévi-Strauss points out that the old-fashioned sense of the term 'bricolage' applied to ballgames, billiards, hunting and riding, in relation to some 'extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle'.<sup>68</sup> In his work on bricolage, Martin Roberts claims that the term 'bricolage' is interchangeable with *détournement*, recalling the Situationists' drive to subvert meaning and drift through space in an unfixed detour,<sup>69</sup> whilst in French, Roberts points out, the legal term for child molestation is *détournement de mineur*, 'providing an unexpected analogy between bricolage and perversion'.<sup>70</sup> Westermann's bricolaged objects such as *Mysterious Yellow Mausoleum* that both conceal and partially reveal strange, surreal fragments that promise yet thwart any resolution, demand a mode of looking that is as perverse as the object's structure is eccentric.

This model of bricolage as somehow 'perverse' or obsessive could serve as a model through which to theorise Westermann's practice. Westermann's adorned surfaces and detailed sculptures have been described by Kozloff as a 'tantrum of craftsmanship',<sup>71</sup> and by Dennis Adrian as 'sculptural excrescences', which 'upon closer examination appear close to the obsessional',<sup>72</sup>: a bricolage on the verge of hoarding mania. However, it is precisely his carefully planned and executed working technique that differentiates Westermann's project from that of the obsessive hobbyist who does not know when or how to stop, and which, it might be suggested, serves also to complicate the often-invoked suggestion of Westermann the Surrealist artist—the *objet trouvé* loses something of its psychic charge when so carefully (and consciously) planned and executed. Westermann's bricolaging together of past motifs gives rise to a sense of *déjà vu*, what Walter Benjamin described as the sensation that 'folk art' gives rise to in the spectator,

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<sup>68</sup> Lévi-Strauss, op.cit., p. 16

<sup>69</sup> See Asger Jorn's 'Detoured Painting', and other writings in Elisabeth Sussmann, ed. *On the Passage of a Few People Through a rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972*, Boston, 1989.

<sup>70</sup> Roberts, op.cit., p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Kozloff, op.cit., p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Dennis Adrian, 'The Art of H.C. Westermann', (1976), op.cit., p. 17.

the false belief that the thing seen is somehow already familiar to the subject.<sup>73</sup> That the retrospective practice of bricolage might in some way engender this sense of *déjà vu*, may be reconfigured here as another type of return, this time not retinal but psychic: the *objet retrouvé*, then?

Unlike other Neo-Dadaists, Westermann's humour and punning self-referentiality, whilst prevalent in works such as *Walnut Box* (Ill. 3.16) from 1964, is often tinged with an eroticism and blackness absent from the work of, say Rauschenberg, or Jasper Johns. Westermann is often loosely associated with a Neo-Dadaist sense of anarchy and play, with Duchamp's fondness for bad jokes typically cited as his most obvious precursor. Westermann's *Walnut Box* is a beautifully crafted walnut box, which is in turn filled with walnuts, and stamped with the title along the lid. This explicitly self-referential work shares much with Duchamp's plays on words, for example his alter-ego 'Rose Selavy', and is often cited as an example of Westermann's object-'jokes'. However, Westermann was adamant that his work should not be understood merely as jokes. Works such as *Walnut Box* are, for Westermann, about destabilising the viewer, they are not simply reflexive gags or ontological puns. In 1965 he wrote a scathing letter to Allan Frumkin about critic Brian O'Doherty, who had dared describe his work as visual gags:

Brian O' D-\*!! once wrote a review (he is a "critic") to the effect the pieces were jokes. He should know I am deadly serious & have never made a "joke" yet – For instance the "Walnut Box" was quite removed from being a mere joke – That box came right from my guts as have the ones I've done here. I wonder if he has ever gone into a gallery & picked up a piece + looked at the bottom of it or bothered to walk around behind a piece & study it. When I make a mockery or joke out of work – I will gladly sacrifice my other "ball" first.<sup>74</sup>

Westermann's Surrealist label derives from his seemingly random and eclectic selection of objects, juxtaposed in jarring ways, with his melding of the dreamlike and visceral, the chance encounter and found object that was so passionately

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<sup>73</sup> Walter Benjamin 'Some Remarks on Folk Art'[1929], in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.2., Rodney Livingstone, trans., Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds., Cambridge, MA and London, 1999. In a way, the grand, redemptive gesture of Benjamin's historian, whose task it is to seek light in the darkness of a bygone age could be recast here also within in the cycle of making-do and invention that is the work of the bricoleur.

<sup>74</sup> *Letters from H.C. Westermann*, dated June 1965, to Allan Frumkin, p. 66.

explored and theorised by André Breton in his 1937 book *L'Amour Fou*, or *Mad Love*.<sup>75</sup> Robert Storr points out that Westermann, a generation younger than American Surrealist Joseph Cornell, made no attempt to make contact with any Surrealist artists, claiming instead that Westermann attempted to 'naturalize' surrealism by translating it into a 'workmanlike vernacular'.<sup>76</sup> Unlike the more 'effete' and 'wistful' boxes of Cornell, Westermann, like Samaras, constructed what Storr describes as 'sturdy vitrines in which incongruous but always substantial objects are on display like specimens in a freak show'.<sup>77</sup>

Donald Judd, in his 1963 review of Westermann's show in New York also picked up on the work's 'sturdy' and 'substantial' nature, praising their 'well-made, sanded [and] carefully worked' finish.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, as Judd pointed to Westermann's 'obvious' connection to Surrealism:

It is obvious that Surrealist sources could be found for many of Westermann's ideas. It is just as obvious that the objects are something new.[...] The work is diverse, and so it isn't possible to describe it inclusively.<sup>79</sup>

Judd does not identify what those 'Surrealist sources' of Westermann's are, rather he is suggesting that the works' surreal quality seems to arise from the fact of their intractability. It is not Westermann's Surrealist precedents that interest Judd, but rather the way his works refuse to yield up their meaning. Describing Westermann as 'one of the best artists around',<sup>80</sup> an accolade he was also to accord Lee Bontecou two years later, Judd finds himself utterly taken with these odd, 'thorough' objects.<sup>81</sup> Judd was not merely attempting to ally Westermann with a more contemporary set of references, such as the emergent Minimal aesthetic, but seems to pick up on their directness as specific objects. However, as with his writing on Bontecou, there seems to be something more ambivalent, less clear-cut at work here.

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<sup>75</sup> Breton, André, *Mad Love*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws, Lincoln, NE and London, 1987.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Storr, 'The Devil's Handyman' in *H.C. Westermann*, (2001) op.cit., p.27.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Donald Judd, *The Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax and New York, 1975, p. 99.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



Judd describes the laminated plywood piece *The Rope Tree* (Ill. 3.17) from 1964 in terms of the series of slippages it presents. A coiling twist of wood mounted on a base, *The Rope Tree* resembles, for Judd, rope, wood, and 'tree', with the 'coils' imitating also 'the bodies of people and snakes'.<sup>82</sup> The changing point of view the work offers is not a simple shift of 'one-to-one allusions',<sup>83</sup> Judd argues, but instead offers a complex of multiple meanings, all the more impressive for their economy of form and materials. It is this unstable aspect of the objects, in conjunction with their simplicity of form and status as specific objects, that shows both their surrealist edge, as well as their originality as 'something new'.<sup>84</sup> What Judd has essentially picked up on is the paradox of objects that seem to present themselves to the viewer so directly yet to be so elusive at the same time. He writes '[t]hese are very much objects in their own right, direct although their meaning is recondite'.<sup>85</sup> As Judd so succinctly put it, 'the meaning is hard to get at'.<sup>86</sup>

Dennis Adrian, director of the Allan Frumkin gallery in New York, gave a more straightforwardly Surrealist reading of Westermann's work, when he claims that it is tinged with a 'distillate surrealism'.<sup>87</sup> He described the way Westermann produced work that 'mnemonically refers to a past now inaccessible except through the articulated preserved relics'.<sup>88</sup> It is the teasing suggestion of biographic detail that is so compelling in these works, the condensation of experience and memory into a series of fragments of things. Narrative exposition was never the intention of these works, it is, rather, an example of Westermann 'concentrating instead on a few highly charged motifs'.<sup>89</sup> What places them outside the remit of Surrealism is their rootedness in 'real life', as Schjeldahl puts it, they are more autobiographic than 'oneiric'.<sup>90</sup> This is not merely

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Dennis Adrian, 'The Art of H.C. Westermann', (1976), op.cit., p. 17.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Neal Benezra, *H.C. Westermann: Selections from the Alan and Dorothy Press Collection*, Chicago, 1987.

<sup>90</sup> Schjeldahl, op.cit. (unpaginated).

autobiographic storytelling, however, but a complete utilisation of various encounters, objects and moments, retrieved and replayed within a wholly different network. Such distilled fragments are described best as ‘fossilized evidence’, what Lévi-Strauss describes as the debris, ‘des bribes et des morceaux’, the bric-a-brac that surrounds each individual’s life, functioning now as mnemonic objects to be retrospectively uncovered and revisited.<sup>91</sup> Lévi-Strauss’s term ‘the debris of events’ as ‘fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or a society’<sup>92</sup> seems a fitting description of Westermann’s use of his own biography as strategy, that is, Westermann’s strategy of what I’m calling here ‘autobricolage’.

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Westermann’s development of a secret, ‘poetic’ language finds its most powerful treatment in the group of Death Ships he made throughout his career. Westermann returned to the Death Ship time and time again, selecting different aspects of its form and history as he goes back retrospectively over his own work, mining the Death Ship for different ways of making it ‘mean’. When Lévi-Strauss claims that the bricoleur speaks ‘not only *with* things [...] but through the medium of things,’<sup>93</sup> he stresses the privacy of that visual language, of the symbols and the ways in which they are used in order to ‘mean’. Between the privacy of this language and the privation of our access to it, the necessity arises, for the viewer, to glean what one can, to create one’s own language in response to the Death Ship, in order to make it ‘speak’ through the practice of ‘autobricolage’.

The repetition of the Death Ship motif functions as a kind of punctuation mark in Westermann’s retrospective cycle of bricolage, a refrain that haunts him. The Death Ship and its accompanying motif of the shark fin operate as ‘full stops’ in Westermann’s visual grammar. This idea finds its literal materialisation in the series of punctuation marks Westermann carved and mounted on polished wood and ‘marble’ bases, such as *A Positive Thought* (Ill. 3.18), from 1962, a carved wooded exclamation mark, and *Untitled (Question Mark)* (Ill. 3.19) of 1962, both

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<sup>91</sup> Lévi-Strauss, op.cit., p. 22.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

coated in a swathe of lurid enamel paints. It was these works by Westermann that artist Richard Artschwager has invoked in his sculptural punctuation marks, mounted on the wall in relief, which he called 'blips'; so too has William T. Wiley in his 'marbled' plywood *Enigma Shield* (date unknown) (Ill. 3.20).

An early work, *Death Ship of No Port* (Ill. 3.21), from 1957, features a ship, lost at sea. Toward the front of the ship is seated a small figure, hunched up and alone. The motifs of the Death Ship and the shark fin also appear in a number of other works, for example the half-submerged vessel in *Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea*. The shark fin is also found in *Untitled* (Ill. 3.22), 1965, a wooden glass-fronted vitrine that has a black and white photograph of a married couple pasted to the back panel. The groom is in full naval uniform, and the edges of the box are studded with the repeated form of the shark fin. Two small gatherings of white lily stems, a classic funerary flower, are placed at the bottom of the box. The apparent harmony of the decoupage background, an outdated image pasted to the back wall of the box, is punctuated with the actuality of a war that this man will surely die in, the happy moment of this couple's wedding literally enclosed within a language of death.

The Death Ship remained one of the most persistent motifs Westermann used. They have been cast in bronze, dripped with tar, 'marbled' with a mixture of enamel paint and oil, and meticulously carved in wood. They are sometimes covered in dollar bills, sometimes they rest upon flat, spare bases, at other times they are encased in wooden vitrines, whilst others come as part of a box set, carefully constructed wooden boxes designed specifically to hold the ship.

What each of the Death Ships share is a basic formal shape. After several attempts at making a successful one, Westermann finally arrived at the decision to create a slant on one side of the bottom of each ship, so that it appears to list slightly. This lurching, lop-sided form evokes a loss of balance. It seems to list at just the moment before the sturdy war ship sinks into the sea, a moment of becoming in which the ship slips from being symbol of protection to one of death, becoming a mass coffin for the many passengers or service men and women aboard. This is clearly seen in *Dismasted Ship* (Ill. 3.23) from 1956, a carved

walnut piece, comprising a simple, listing ship form, two mast poles sticking up from the centre, with a small bronze figure fixed to the surface, arms outstretched in the Christ-like pose of a martyr, a reference to a friend and fellow Marine whose naked, tattooed body Westermann found at the top of a pile of other dead men: 'a pretty ungodly sight'<sup>94</sup>.

The original source of the Death Ship motif stemmed from Westermann's horrific experiences whilst serving in the Second World War. One particular incident, recounted by Westermann in a letter written in 1978, told this unsettling tale. Having not set foot on land for over twelve months, Westermann went as part of a working party to a neighbouring ammunitions ship, only to return to the Enterprise for another six months. A few days later, he heard that the ammunitions ship had been bombed, with no survivors. Westermann wrote that after that 'I became a fucking coward & was ready to come home immediately, to hell with the war and all that crap'.<sup>95</sup> Describing the ship as a 'Death Ship' Westermann later wrote to another friend how, in his drawings and sculptures of the Death Ship 'I'd like to add the horrible SMELL OF DEATH but that's impossible, dammit! of 2300 men'.<sup>96</sup>

Another time, another Death Ship: this time the attack he witnessed on USS Franklin, sister ship to the Enterprise, again during the Second World War. Westermann wrote 'another Death Ship that left an indelible [impression] & that was the poor ill-fated FRANKLIN'.<sup>97</sup> After the bombing, USS Enterprise had escorted the burnt-out hull of the Franklin back to land, the smell of burning flesh and cargo haunting Westermann for the rest of his life. Westermann recalled how the Franklin 'was still smoking & had terrific list & the smell of death from her was horrible'.<sup>98</sup> The later work *U.S.S. Franklin Arising from an Oil Slick Sea* (Ill. 3.24) from 1976 refers specifically to this encounter. The oil slick of the title is the black, white and grey slick of marble-effect paint from which the ship arises. Emerging from a shark-infested sea, it is as though the Franklin might here be

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<sup>94</sup> *Letters from H.C. Westermann*, p. 163.

<sup>95</sup> Westermann, as quoted in *HC Westermann: WEST*, David King, and Melani McKim-King eds., Richmond, CA, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>96</sup> *Letters from H.C. Westermann*, op.cit., p. 152.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>98</sup> Westermann, 1966, as quoted in *HC Westermann: WEST*, op.cit., p. 15.

saved by the redemptive act of being painted, or carved, even, in 'marble', as testimony to, or recuperated as, 'art'. Through this strategy of autobricolage, in which Westermann recycles emblems of his own biography that return instead *as* representation, he creates a system of meaning which migrates across different objects. He is using his own biographic incidents as elements of that system, the playing out, as it were, of a kind of makeshift life through his bricolage.

Although reconfigured as sinking, or, in the case of *U.S.S. Franklin Arising from an Oil Slick Sea*, rising up from the sea; immortalised in 'marble', coated in tar or peopled with marines, the Death Ship refuses to be mobilised in the way that other motifs of Westermann's were. There is no permeability to the way in which the Death Ship can 'mean' in this system. They signal a rupture, or moment of breakdown in the bricoleur's redemptive practice of making something new from something old, the ghosts that haunt his system that return in reconfigured forms. Whilst the most explicit works by Westermann in terms of their references and historical grounding—they are 'about' war, they are 'about' Westermann's horrific experiences at sea—the Death Ship stands as the most enigmatic form he constructed, the repetition of which bears all the marks of the secret, or story, that remains repressed, however often it is recalled and repeated. That the true horror of a burning, sinking, ship-turned-death-trap could never be wholly articulated or represented became a point of frustration for Westermann, who wrote

I guess I always loved ships...I like the sea + feel at home there. But then I have seen 'Death Ships', many of them + I can't get them out of my lousy system. You know how it is! Well I still make those ships + I am a 48 year old fart. + they still aren't very good, but I don't give a damn + they satisfy some kind of need there—But they are all Death Ships now.<sup>99</sup>

Although Westermann had always loved ships, and the use of the ship form always came 'naturally' to him, stemming from his days growing up in Los Angeles when he would spend days at the harbour 'just looking around',<sup>100</sup> this all changed after his military service. Having served in two wars, the ship returned in the form of Westermann's Death Ship, which went on to haunt his system of

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<sup>99</sup> *Letters from H.C. Westermann*, op.cit., p. 149.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

construction and building. His romance with the sea and the navy became, post-war, replete with sepulchral horror and refusal to fit into place, for as we can see, 'they are all Death Ships now'. Try as he might, Westermann had to admit defeat in his attempts to retrospectively recuperate its form, when he wrote: 'I can't get them out of my lousy system'. A Death Ship from 1965, *Death Ship Run Over by a '66 Lincoln Continental* (Ill. 3.25) contains a pine Death Ship resting upon a sea of dollar bills, evoking the financial and moral hypocrisy of warfare, the ship bearing the tyre marks of Westermann's father-in-law's Lincoln car. The decision to place this work in a vitrine, sealed off from the loving hands of the artist caused Westermann to write, in an illustrated letter to Frumkin, of how he had handled this 'strange and beautiful' ship ten thousand times before encasing it, as though he could not put it down.<sup>101</sup>

For all its visual force and repeated appearance in three-dimensions, it is in Westermann's celebrated drawings, prints and illustrated letters that he engages the motif of the death ship in its most literal depiction, complete with surroundings, details, figures and planes, with the ever-present shark fins gliding in the oceans he sketches. Lee Bontecou had also sought, in her drawing, to explore the implications of her sculptural practice, where the suggestive abstraction of the reliefs ultimately became her preferred way of working, replacing the more literal drawings of grimacing mouths and chomping teeth. As it has recently been pointed out, 'Westermann's prints seldom have a clear connection with the *forms* of his sculptural production—though the themes and concerns are shared'.<sup>102</sup> Although the Death Ship motif often appears in his series of lithographic prints begun in 1967, the ship is mediated through an engagement with American films and folklore, just as his inclusion of an image of Popeye on occasions is Westermann's humorous mediation of his own sea experiences through the cartoon bawdiness of Popeye. For all this obfuscation and mediation, Westermann is unmistakably presenting a set of images that explicitly evoke the violence and trauma of warfare and the loneliness and fear he experienced during his time spent at sea. In one illustrated letter from 1978 (Ill. 3.26), Westermann

<sup>101</sup> *Letters from H.C. Westermann*, to Allan Frumkin, [1965] Ibid, p. 69.

<sup>102</sup> Dennis Adrian, 'The Artist as Print-Maker', in *See America First: The Prints of H.C. Westermann*, Chicago, 2001, p. 30.

depicted the burnt-out USS Franklin in the aftermath of the kamikaze attack outlined above, from which has been hurled the naked, dead figure of his tattooed friend, Corporal Paul 'Stick' Flower, whose body Westermann saw and identified by the large American eagle emblazoned across his chest, depicted here in blood-red to match the sky, in which sits a cartoonish depiction of the devil, who has usurped God, taking his place on a cloud of flames and smoke.

Within Westermann's 'permutable' system of bricolage,<sup>103</sup> the shark fin is also drawn from earlier works and drawings, standing as a stamp of authenticity which marks the work as by 'Westermann'. It is also, like the laminated exclamation mark, a point of punctuation or resistance in his system. Westermann's attempts to exorcise the terror and deep attachment he felt in connection to the sea and the American Navy have echoes across his artistic output, signed always with his trademark anchor, metonym of the Death Ship whose form he could not resist. Westermann also uses the shark fin in his 1965 *A Piece from the Museum of Shattered Dreams* (Ill. 3.27), placing it at the base of this large peanut-shaped wooden object, 'tied' with twine with two trademark wooden rope 'knots' at either end. The mysterious package is bound up in a rhetoric of loss and shattered dreams, punctuated at the base with the carved anchor-signature of the artist, and two ebony shark fins, reconfigured this time within the Death Ships' grammar of retrospection and disappointment.

In these works, which are poised on an axis between the historic specificities of war and a more general melancholic sense of death, the Death Ship functions as though it may be the secret that unlocks Westermann's system of bricolage. Lévi-Strauss wrote,

[t]he elements which the "bricoleur" collects and uses are "pre-constrained" like the constitutive elements of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Lévi-Strauss, op.cit., p. 20.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 19. I want to retain this sense of the various elements of bricolage containing within them an echo of their past in order to counter claims that Westermann's remit of emblems is simply arbitrary, or is just a stock set of symbols signifying 'war', 'death', etc.

This finds its most extreme example in the case of the Death Ship. It just can't be shifted or re-worked. Far from its being simply 'pre-constrained', harbouring echoes of its horrific origins and past function, the Death Ship may even signal a threat to the continued working of that system: a full-stop.

The apparently simplistic, almost crude form of Westermann's Death Ships camouflages the actual complexity of the motif, made manifest in its repetition in Westermann's twenty-seven year career. During this time it changed very little, with Westermann often returning to its initial sparsely detailed format, carved from one piece of wood. Its trademark appearance does not get diluted through time or repetition; as the ships lurch between black humour, political comment, and the depiction of tragedy and loss, the insistence of the Death Ship becomes more and more pronounced.

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The stories that Westermann's works *seem* to tell are highly autobiographical, yet, as Judd pointed out, they are oddly 'recondite' at the same time. As Kozloff put it 'one does not know which one of several conceivable interpretations most applies'.<sup>105</sup> Dennis Adrian has compellingly described this situation in terms of a paradox, in which 'there is no mystery, obscurity or obfuscation in his work or its methods, but what they are about are mysteries and puzzling enigmas of perception and understanding'.<sup>106</sup> The red herring of narrative cohesion we are presented with is only one more fragmented, recycled and opaque cryptic object. As Kozloff put it, 'H.C. Westermann is a sculptor who may be said to be obsessed with visual art's lack of utterance'. It is a problem of unspeakability, raising the question '[h]ow to give voice to his soul when the product he makes, his only real form of communication, is, in fact, silent'.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Kozloff, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>106</sup> Dennis Adrian, *H.C. Westermann*, (1981) op.cit. As I showed in chapter one, it is the structural devices of obfuscation, secrecy and concealment rather than the discovery of what those secrets and hidden mysteries might be that is so disquieting and interesting in these works.

<sup>107</sup> Kozloff, op.cit., p. 6.



Beneath their raucous, vibrant, colourful, eclectic surfaces and interiors, Westermann's works radiate this silence, or unutterability. Bricolaged together, the retrospective process of retrieval, identified as a strategy of pseudo-folk, finds its explanation not in the serial trope of modernist reproduction, or the vernacular of Pop or Surrealism, but in the repetition of a language that cannot be spoken, of experiences that cannot find their visual counterpart. That mythic past or folk tradition of which Westermann's works seem so much a part, is found to be false. He has invented his own tradition and past, through the retrospective strategy of bricolage, presenting a permutable system of motifs that recur and repeat as though seeking resolution, yet lacking the means by which to achieve it.

Inaccessibility has proved to be the defining aspect of Westermann's work since its inception. Allan Frumkin, Westermann's first dealer in Chicago, recalls how on occasion Westermann would send a piece of work so tightly worked and pieced together, he literally had to break into it,<sup>108</sup> and when Westermann's laminated plywood piece *Antimobile* (Ill. 3.28) was first examined by curators at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the joints of the wooden box supporting *Antimobile* were so tightly fitted it was initially thought that Westermann had painted them on.<sup>109</sup> In fact, the very first time his pinball machine box piece, *About a Black Magic Marker* (Ill. 3.29) was exhibited in Chicago, in 1958, it became the subject of an attack, as someone tried to crack into its interior. Westermann declared proudly afterwards that it was 'so well built that when some crazy fucker tried to hack it apart it was too strong for him to do much to it. Just scratched the surface'.<sup>110</sup>

The private personal and 'poetic language' Westermann speaks is one replete with silence and riddles, akin to Abraham's and Torok's description of the discourse of the analysand as an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, or collection of disparate, broken fragments. These 'broken symbols' suggest that the words spoken are 'shrouded by an enigma too dense to be deciphered by known forms of listening'.<sup>111</sup> The

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<sup>108</sup> Allan Frumkin, in conversation with the author, New York, April 2001.

<sup>109</sup> In conversation with Alan Myers, registrar, Whitney Museum of Modern Art, April, 2001.

<sup>110</sup> Westermann, as quoted in April Kingsley, op.cit. The incident occurred the first time *About a Black Magic Marker* was exhibited in Chicago, in 1958.

<sup>111</sup> Abraham and Torok, op.cit., p. 79.

symbolic meaning as such is not lacking, Abraham and Torok conclude, but rather, the correct means by which to 'listen', in order to find it. Similarly, the problem of access to the secret language of Westermann's system of autobricolage is a factor literally impacted within the objects themselves. In the following chapter, I return to this question of silence and how to 'listen' in relation to the motif of the ear. In this concluding chapter the ear serves as a metaphor for the various ways in which acts of artistic homage function.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Haunting/Homage: Bruce Nauman and The Case of Westermann's Ear

On March 30th, 1967, in a photographic studio in London's Chelsea, British artist Peter Blake began arranging the series of wax dummies and cardboard cut-outs that would appear, massed together, on the cover of the Beatles album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Ill. 4.1). The concept behind the cover was an imaginary crowd at a Sgt. Pepper concert. Behind John, Ringo, Paul and George were gathered eighty-seven figures, drawn from art, politics, music, literature, television, cinema and religion. The people selected were both contemporary and historical, the dead jostling for elbow room alongside the living, forming a kaleidoscopic sea of famous (and not so famous) people, the flamboyantly vivid face of one countered by the ghostly sepia-printed look of another. The selection was based upon lists compiled by the Beatles. George selected mostly Gurus, John wanted Jesus and Hitler, whilst Ringo was happy with 'whatever the others say.'<sup>1</sup> The rest of the crowd was chosen by Blake and his dealer, Robert Fraser.

Collaged together, the various celebrities, icons and artists fight for space on the small elevated platform they stand on. They overlap and there are size discrepancies, for example, where a miniscule Shirley Temple comes only to the knee of a statuesque Marlene Dietrich. Certain figures leap out, instantly grabbing one's attention, whereas others take longer to identify. The black and white sultry gaze of Marilyn Monroe stares out from below Edgar Allen Poe, whilst the right-hand side of her head is obscured slightly by her neighbour, William Burroughs. The top right image of Bob Dylan's head is instantly recognisable, as are the smiling, colourful faces of Laurel and Hardy, the louche pose of Marlon Brando and the bearded figure of Karl Marx. Virtually all featured faces are visible and, although a certain amount

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<sup>1</sup> Ringo Starr, as quoted in Peter Blake, inlay sleeve, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band*, [1987], London, 1967.

of obscuring and blocking necessarily occurs, we can see the faces of most people. There is, however, one partially hidden face. Flanked by playwright George Bernard Shaw, soccer player Albert Stubbins and directly beneath the pink double chin of Oliver Hardy, is a black and white image of H.C. Westermann, his face concealed by the lime-green feathered plume protruding from George Harrison's hat. The photograph which Blake has blown-up and mounted on cardboard is cropped from an often-reproduced image of Westermann in his yard, next to his 1963 laminated plywood 'knotted' piece, *The Big Change* (Ill. 4.2), hands in pockets, evenly greeting the camera's gaze.

So near yet so far; placed in the front line of the crowd, second only to the Beatles themselves, yet refused a place in the final line-up of visible, identifiable faces, Westermann's effacement is an accident no doubt of the practicalities of collage and arrangement of such a large collection of images. Westermann's placement does, however, neatly insert him into a moment of popular culture, as well as a process of assemblage. It also incorporates him into a pantheon or hall of fame that registers Westermann's significance, if only obliquely, for his historical moment and artistic context. A studio shot taken prior to the final line up in which Blake is seen arranging the crowd, before the Beatles take their place, clearly shows the image of Westermann (Ill. 4.3). It is an oversized image, his head looms larger than either of his neighbours. The photograph of Westermann was taken straight on, swept back hair revealing an open countenance, a strong presence captured only in this snap-shot of Blake's preparation before its elision from the finished collage and final album cover.

Only Westermann is wholly effaced amongst this sea of contemporaries and celebrity icons. Obliterated by a hat, this chance arrangement of a feather floating over Westermann's face, momentarily absenting him from the scene he is so centrally placed in, provides a starting point for this chapter. Westermann still persists as a figure in the margins of contemporary art practice, having haunted the work of a

whole generation of artists. Westermann's inclusion in Blake's somewhat twee album cover highlights the fact that it seems to be Westermann's fate to be framed in a provincial Pop canon of art, although in this chapter I re-examine this categorisation of his work in the light of those subsequent references and homages to Westermann that have appeared in other artists' work, and which his work seems to attract.

During the same year as Blake's seminal album cover, and four years after the construction of Westermann's *The Big Change*, West-coast based artist Bruce Nauman, fresh out of art school, produced a series of drawing and sculpture homages 'to', or 'about', Westermann. Whilst at graduate school Nauman had been taught by William T. Wiley, Manuel Neri and Robert Arneson, and it was Arneson and Wiley who kindled Nauman's interest in Westermann. The idea of paying homage has latterly featured in Arneson's own work from the eighties, including a woodcut print of Westermann's head, trademark cigar clamped between his teeth, as part of his *Five Famous Guys* series of prints from 1983, which also featured Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon, Picasso and Arneson himself (Ill. 4.4). Another of Arneson's works dedicated to Westermann includes a wooden bust of Westermann, upside-down atop a craggy, carved pedestal, with the thick trail of cigar smoke trailing downward from the upturned head. Called *Head Stand on a Cliff* (Ill. 4.5), the title is a homage to Westermann's own use of bad puns and word play in the labelling of his pieces, whilst the choice of wood in this piece by Arneson, a trained and famous ceramicist, is an explicit homage to Westermann's own commitment to carpentry and woodcraft.

In 1966, whilst still a student, Nauman had already toyed with the notion of homage in his fibreglass and resin *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists* (Ill. 4.6), in which he casts his own knee five times in a mould. One year later, in a sketch of the same name, Nauman seems to be planning another work of the same nature, except this time he chose to assign names to the five knee imprints (Ill. 4.7). The artists whose names he listed in the sketch were William T. Wiley, Larry Bell, Lucas Samaras and Leland Bell, an eclectic selection of artists who were all influential in

the Bay Area at the time, and also Willem de Kooning. In the sketch, Nauman has scratched out de Kooning's name and written instead 'Self?', replacing the most famous, established artist on the list. He proposes himself, then, as the inheritor of de Kooning's position at the same time aligning himself with some more 'moderately' well known contemporary artists, which he noted at the top of the sketch.

This collection of artist's knees shows Nauman is creating is less a reverential acknowledgement, and something more like an in-joke. By losing the oldest, most famous artist from the list, Nauman instead slips himself into the line-up: a pantheon of part-objects that in turn stands as a series of part-homages with Nauman as the central figure, represented indexically across the strip of indented resin. I want to think about how homage functions in this and other works. Although this can be seen as a knowing, post-modern practice of self-referentiality, it is also more interesting than that. These are all artists that meant something to Nauman. What that entails I shall explore by building on my discussion in the last chapter.

Nauman often incorporated himself into his works, but always in parts, casting himself in bits and pieces, as so many spare limbs, waists, hands, mouths and torsos. With his tongue firmly in his cheek, Nauman's insertion of himself into this series of 'famous' artists is like Arneson's *Five Famous Guys* series, where he also ironically inserts himself into a line-up of infamous American artists as one of the 'guys'. Both Nauman, and later Arneson, are laying false claims to celebrity and ditching the art historical canon of 'guys'. By including themselves in a list of great artists, both Nauman and Arneson effect both a pastiche of the canon of so-called 'great masters', and also an ironic suggestion that they may be the inheritors of that throne. They inject a dose of West coast eclecticism into the higher echelons of New York's finest artists. This parodic taking on board of the persona or qualities of another, although making fun of the category of the great artist, functions also as homage, whether wry, jokey, reverential or otherwise. This making work 'in the name of' another artist could read as a form of mimicry, that takes a complex turn in Nauman's series of

homages 'to', 'of', or 'about' Westermann that he made the following year, in which Nauman again uses his own body as a substitute for the presence of Westermann.

To clarify, by 'homage', I mean the incorporation of another artist's name or practice in the work of another, to various ends, whether as celebration, commemoration, mimicry, impersonation, collaboration, parody or as something slightly less self-conscious or intentional. Typically understood in terms of one yielding, or submitting to the position of another, often of long-dead person, the kinds of homage performed by Nauman, Arneson and other artists at this time take on a rather less fixed definition. They are less reverential, or rather, more reverential in a tongue-in-cheek, jokey way, as though the person to whom homage is being paid is somehow in on the joke. Rather than being cast from bronze or carved in marble, as permanent monuments, the kinds of homage that Nauman and, I shall argue, contemporary artist Rachel Whiteread are involved in are more ephemeral, casual and oblique, retaining a certain amount of ambivalence. Sometimes it is as if they end up being an homage by accident. Dislodging the notion of homage from its usual place within a patriarchal system which marks tradition and establishes continuity, I instead understand homage in terms of a break in the system, as a rupture in the temporal succession of tradition and inheritance. It becomes, paradoxically in practice, something like a break with tradition.

It is around these ideas of the homage and what I shall call the part-homage that this final chapter is structured, as patterns of inheritance and influence are tracked between and amongst certain artists. We have already seen this at work in the series of box-homages addressed in chapter one, the connection between Fontana and Bontecou's use of the void, and Ed Ruscha's work incorporating the image of Westermann. Through this I hope to develop a model for thinking about artistic practice as a rather more complex, disjointed yet connective series of borrowings and inheritances, that I want to consider as a kind of 'haunting', what Nicolas Abraham

has described as a 'phantom effect'.<sup>2</sup> By examining the repeated motif of the 'ear' as it appears both in Nauman's work on Westermann, and the 'ear' as it figures in the work of certain other artists, I want to think about the way in which the 'ear' might stand both metaphorically and quite literally in these cases, as an exemplar of those strategies of listening and silence that the processes of influence and inheritance engage with.

In another context, this is what literary critic Harold Bloom has described as a kind of 'mishearing' of the voices of another's text, in order that the listener might perform what Bloom calls a creative misreading, or 'misprision', through which they might develop their own take on a given text in order to pursue their own connected, though original project.<sup>3</sup> To 'hear' something is a less reliable means of gathering, storing and passing information on than to read something that has been written down, a kind of aural 'word of mouth' that structures both Walter Benjamin's historical task and Derrida's model of 'otobiography', as I shall demonstrate, as well as accounting for the irrational transient 'surd' state of mutability at the centre of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. This kind of hearing, in which the ear may tune in and out, may miss out on accuracy but pick up on something that is closer to the truth. Nauman's homages also function at the level of the partial and irregular, taking the form of an ear, an arm, a loop or a knot, but at the same time they cut through to act-out a deeper correspondence or relation. Toward the end of this chapter I focus on the small, plaster cast of her ear made by Whiteread in 1986, when she too was still a student, as a way of expanding the scope of my project to incorporate later sculptural practices since the sixties.

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<sup>2</sup> See Nicolas Abraham, 'Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology', in Abraham, Nicolas and Torok, Maria, *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1, Nicolas Rand, ed. Chicago, 1994. I will return to Abraham's concept of the phantom toward the end of this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York and Oxford, 1997. I return to Bloom's text toward the end of this chapter.



During his time as a graduate student at the University of California at Davis, Nauman found that the teachers there encouraged students to develop independent ways of working, or, as Nauman put it, they 'left him alone', providing the basis for what Jane Livingstone describes as his 'drastically undirected' engagement with art.<sup>4</sup> Whilst studying, Nauman moved from painting and drawing in 1965 to producing fibreglass sculptures of body parts and abstract casts in rubber as well as participating in two performance works of art by other students. It was during his highly productive time studying for his Masters degree that the seeds were sown for Nauman's eclectic career, in which he went on to work in sculpture, performance, installation and video art.

Whilst at art college, Nauman and his then-tutor Wiley, with whom Nauman completed a number of collaborative projects, decided to embark upon an attempted collaboration with Westermann. When Wiley and Nauman found out that Westermann had once lived in San Francisco for a short time in 1964, they decided to begin a correspondence with him, in the hope that he would engage in a series of mail-art exchanges with them. They were inspired by the recent Man Ray retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in which they were fascinated by Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (Ill. 4.8), a sewing-machine bound up in a sheet with lengths of rope, which was given the secondary title of *The Riddle* in the accompanying catalogue for the show.<sup>5</sup> Wiley and Nauman were drawn to the cryptic nature of this work, both its wrapped, secret centre and its two titles that seemed to be both explanatory 'information' and encrypted enigmas at the same time. They felt that this work had strong resonance's with the works of H.C. Westermann,

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Livingstone, in Jane Livingstone and Marcia Tucker, *Bruce Nauman: Work from 1965-1972*, Los Angeles, 1973, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> This famous work by Man Ray is, of course, referring to Lautreamont's famous suggestion that the juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table embodied a kind of psychically liberating experience, the chance encounter, a concept taken up with gusto by the Surrealist artists. In many ways, this cryptic, wrapped-up object serves as prime example of the kinds of secretive objects under discussion in this thesis, itself a kind of 'haunting' motif.

and was an object that went on to haunt each of their future work, lurking in the background of much of Nauman's later works and titles.

Westermann had fascinated Nauman for several years by this point, ever since he had seen his 1958 *Mysteriously Abandoned New Home*, on show at The Art Institute of Chicago. Nauman recalls first seeing the work in the stairwell of the museum, 'a kind of lighthouse tower with prominent windows,' which he found 'strangely out of character with all the rest of the stuff in the museum'.<sup>6</sup> Wiley and Nauman decided to write to Westermann and ask him for his ideas on Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, specifically the 'enigma' of its title, in the hope that one enigma might resolve the 'riddle' or secret of another, in their attempt to 'get the ear,' as Neal Benezra put it, of Westermann.<sup>7</sup> Wiley described how Nauman and himself set about contacting Westermann:

We put the letter together with a piece of carbon paper, folded them up, and sent them to him. The letter would pick up scratches, fingerprints, folds, and so on while it was handled in the mail. We thought it would be funny. We didn't make any marks ourselves, but it would arrive with whatever marks had appeared during the trip.<sup>8</sup>

Westermann's response to the oblong sheets of carbon paper was one of his famous illustrated letters, a decorated valentine that said 'I know you're gonna think I'm some mean thing—but that card was almost an enigma in itself...Slow down! What's your hurry?'.<sup>9</sup> Wiley recalls that when he first met Westermann, and said it was himself and Nauman that had sent the note, Westermann responded 'I thought you

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Nauman, as quoted in Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, New York, 1988, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> This phrase is Benezra's, which he uses when referring to Wiley and Nauman's attempted correspondence with Westermann. See Neal Benezra, Kathy Halbreich, Paul Schimmel, Robert Storr, ed., Joan Simon, *Bruce Nauman*, Minneapolis, 1994. Although Nauman did not try to contact Westermann again, Wiley did continue the correspondence, becoming a friend of Westermann's. In 1967, Westermann responded to Wiley's request for a piece of work with a wooden plaque, a carved gift that bears the title *Nothing is to be done for William T. Wiley* etched into the surface.

<sup>8</sup> William T. Wiley, as quoted in David King and Melani McKim-King, eds. *HC Westermann: WEST*, California, 1997, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> H.C. Westermann, as quoted in *Ibid.*

were puttin' me on', to which Wiley assured him they most certainly were not, 'that both Bruce and I liked-and had a deep respect for his work...which was true'.<sup>10</sup>

Evacuating all but the chance imprint of the journey and any marks Westermann might choose to make on the paper upon its arrival, this blank sheet of carbon paper outlines a haphazard, fugitive strategy of collaboration, in which the figure of 'Westermann' is sought but necessarily deflected before arrival, as any definitive imprint he might choose to make would be underscored and bound by the scratches, pressures, folds and scrapes already inflicted during transit. The carbon paper could never arrive in the same state, but will always be somehow altered. Sending the paper to Westermann, an artist they admired, and point of reference, even, for both of them, so that it is marked by their own project upon arrival neatly inverts the usual model of influence and inheritance by sending Westermann the means by which he must make his own 'mark'. This sheet of carbon paper pre-empts Westermann's response by providing the boundaries within which it can be made. The complicated notion of homage that both Wiley and Nauman engaged in with this project highlights the potentially ambivalent reception of such a gesture, with Westermann himself certain they were merely 'puttin' him on'.

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The series of homages to Westermann that Nauman made incorporated both sketches and sculptures, demonstrating that although he had abandoned his drawing practice two years earlier, it remained an important medium for working through formal problems in three dimensions. *Large Knot Becoming an Ear (Knot Hearing Well)* (Ill. 4.9) is a sketchy line drawing, formally resembling the vertical format of Westermann's *The Big Change* (Ill. 4.10), and was probably intended as a preparatory outline for Nauman's sculpture of the same year entitled *Westermann's Ear* (Ill. 4.11), an object combining the readymade, found material of rope with plaster and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

wax. The other homage works Nauman made in the series are the three *Square Knot* works, the two sketches *Square Knot (H.C. Westermann)* (Ill. 4.12), *Untitled (Square Knot)* (Ill. 4.13), and the sculpture *Untitled* (Ill. 4.14) all from 1967, and all of which feature a pair of crossed arms that echo the tied knot of the rope from which they are suspended. Interestingly, at the same time Nauman also made a series of homages to Henry Moore, which I address in some detail later on.

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In *Westermann's Ear* a length of rope is 'knotted' extremely loosely in a number of spare, yet elegant spirals, as though a knot half-way through completion at the point before the two slightly fraying and unsealed ends are pulled and the loop secured. One end hangs lower than the other, which has been used to form the central curve of the loop. Cascading downward in a series of lazy loops, the rope has a coarsely-shaped clump of white plaster adhered halfway around the left-hand side of the largest hanging loop. The swirl of plaster clings to a tightly-pulled reef knot which remains visible through the plaster which has stuck only partially to the knot, moving from opaque and thickly layered at the top to patchy and fragmentary toward the bottom.

We are told that this reads as an 'ear' not only by the title of the piece, but by the barest suggestion of an ear form, created by shaping the top side of the plastered knot into a curve that resembles the tip of an ear. It is easy to make such a connection once we see this detail, and we can enjoy the absurdity of the gesture, at first so slight that it hardly registers, then so clear that it seems blindingly obvious. What becomes less clear as one looks more closely at this work, however, is whether that plastered reef knot is in fact the only 'ear' to which the title refers. Might it not also be referring to the large loop of rope itself, that could also register as somehow bodily, an abstracted 'ear'. Does this work depict two 'ears', one made up of the looped rope and the other the plastered knot? Is one the double or echo of the other? Or should

we read the looped rope as an abstracted profile portrait, with the 'ear' attached to the left-hand side of the (Westermann's?) 'face'?

This looped, spiral portrait of Westermann's ear finds another double in Robert Smithson's comparison of his 1972 *Spiral Jetty* with Brancusi's abstract portrait of James Joyce as a 'spiral ear' (Ill. 4.15), in which he claims the ear-spiral metaphor 'suggests both a visual and an aural scale, in other words it indicates a sense of scale that resonates in the eye and the ear at the same time'.<sup>11</sup> In this portrait of Joyce as spiral ear, Brancusi is emphasising the aural register of language; that Joyce is identifiable as a sound, that language is material not seen but heard. What is interesting here is not simply that *Spiral Jetty* formally resembles an abstract 'ear', but rather Smithson's emphasis on the importance of auditory as well as visual registers of perception. In both Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* film, over which he narrates a dialogue, and of course, Nauman's own video works incorporating sound, such as *Sound Breaking Wall* from 1969, in which two audiotapes play in an empty room, one with the sound of Nauman exhaling, the other of him making a pounding sound and laughing, the spectator is kept in a state of agitation and anticipation. Rather than the vociferous, devouring motif of the mouth, or the eye, the work of aurality demands a fundamentally receptive audience, with the ear open to that which envelops and fills it. What interests me here is the point at which the ear of the viewer encounters its double in the work of art. Who is listening then, and to whom? Who is speaking, in order that they might be heard?

Describing his encounter at the centre of *Spiral Jetty* (Ill. 4.16), Smithson finds himself utterly disorientated, his boundaries and sense of physical placement and presence placed under overwhelming pressure. He asks '[w]as I but a shadow in a plastic bubble hovering in a place outside mind and body [...] I was slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty' [1972], *Collected Writings*, Jack Flam, ed., California, 1996, p. 147.

the end of the spiral'.<sup>12</sup> What is compelling about Smithson's description of *Spiral Jetty* is both the disorientation of subjectivity it causes, and also the way in which that disorientation is echoed in the subsequent loss of 'logic' from the work itself, as it spirals from a rationally mapped grid (the coordinates of the jetty's actual place in the water, as plotted on a map) to a 'surd state', that is, a state of irrationality and silence.<sup>13</sup> Smithson writes, 'the surd takes over and leads one into a world that cannot be expressed by number or rationality'.<sup>14</sup> A muted sound, or silence is to be found at the centre of the spiral; the ear that cannot hear enmeshed within a world of irrationality.

The 'irrationality' that features in *Westermann's Ear*, whilst confusing in its title as to where exactly 'Westermann' is located, does not threaten subjectivity in the way *Spiral Jetty* does. Instead, it manages to render Westermann's presence in the work in a fairly cryptic way. Joan Simon's account of *Westermann's Ear* from the 1987 catalogue accompanying Nauman's show at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, understands the loops of rope figuratively, reading the piece in terms of a portrait of a head, describing 'a very loose knot barely outlining the shape of a head with a cast of an ear attached'.<sup>15</sup> Qualifying this statement with the phrase 'barely outlining' lends this description a certain amount of ambiguity, as no doubt intended by Nauman when making and naming the piece, as the viewer is encouraged to linger over the shape, to peer at the crusted plaster knot and to think about what the title means, for Westermann's name which had and continues to have a cult status. Simon goes on to read this work as a homage to Westermann's working practice, describing the 'portrait' as 'an affectionate, open-ended portrait, a lyrically precise statement

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 149. See Margaret Iversen, 'Et in Utah Ego', for a fascinating discussion of the death drive, and 'differenciation' in relation to the model of subjectivity Smithson outlines in *Spiral Jetty*. To be published in her forthcoming book, *Art Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Thanks to Margaret Iversen for letting me read a unpublished draft of her chapter on *Spiral Jetty*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Joan Simon, 'Nauman Variations: Back to the Future', in Nicholas Serota, Joan Simon and Jean-Christophe Amman, *Bruce Nauman*, London, 1987, p. 16.

locating the sculptor's endeavor not only in the hands but in the mind'.<sup>16</sup> Reading *Westermann's Ear* in this light, Westermann is declared to be 'a vital figure, an artist who continues to 'see' and 'know' because he is open to new ideas'.<sup>17</sup> The suggestion of this work being a thought-portrait, 'drawn' in rope, as homage to the openness of Westermann's own project seems problematic. It is, I argue, a far less anodyne homage-as-celebration than Simon is suggesting. This is not a straightforward portrait, anymore than it is a clear-cut homage by Nauman as admirer of Westermann's work. Rather, it engages highly self-consciously with that concept of the homage, of what, or how to posit a relation to another artist. The image comes undone before our eyes, collapsing into an irresolvable spiral which is as unstable as the looped rope positioned precariously in a 'knotted' position. It is a fantasy of security and fixity that threatens to collapse in the face of the logic of the piece—a physical undoing of the body-part as literal counter to Smithson's disintegrating subjectivity at the centre of *Spiral Jetty*.<sup>18</sup>

Three years earlier, Samaras had incorporated an ear into one of his colourful boxes. Like Nauman's ear, Samaras suspended his part-way down a length of rope. This ear hangs down the side of the box, and is placed next to a suspended severed finger, both of which just fall short of the dangerous bed of nails covering the bottom of this plastic container. Backed by mirrored glass, *Box No. 15* (Ill. 4.17) from 1964 is part of a set of boxes which, like Nauman's 'Westermann' series of pieces, encapsulate another form of homage. The parenthetical title of *Box No. 15* is 'the L Box', which,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> See Mignon Nixon, 'Posing the Phallus', *October*, Spring 2000, pp. 99-127, for a fascinating analysis of the logic of the part-object and how it 'survives' in post-war art as disruptive, repetitive embodiments of the death-drive. Nixon's description of the part-object as it appears in the work of artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Yayoi Kusama, Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and Nauman, in which the body returns in a number of irruptive, phantasmatic part-objects, draws upon the psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein. In Kleinian theory, the subject does not progress in a linear developmental pattern from infancy through to later development, moving from one stage to the next, but rather the subject moves sideways, as it were, through a series of positions open to them that they can move between. Nixon's work provides a fascinating model of disruptive inheritance that I am developing here, something both the temporal trajectory and kinds of objects under discussion in this chapter would convincingly lend themselves too.

along with the 'U', 'C', 'A' and 'S' Boxes, constitute Samaras's own 'auto-homage', although however much longevity and remembrance might be these works aim, its status is just as provisional as that of *Westermann's Ear*. The LUCAS boxes are not fixed, but can be re-arranged and opened up, and they contain labyrinthine tunnels and sections of mirror that spatially destabilise the boxes and, subsequently, the status of LUCAS himself. The macabre elements hung inside the 'L Box' consist of a series of part-objects, the result of a series of violent cuts that culminate here in a finger and ear. Samaras's intention with these boxes was to insert himself into art history. Just as Duchamp had ironically commemorated his own artistic career in *Boîte-en-Valise*, so Samaras claims also to 'see this place in history called Samaras's that he wants to commemorate, saying, 'it is as if it is mine'.<sup>19</sup> In this mythical place which Samaras tries to capture in this 'auto-homage' series of boxes, 'there is this spiral tower and I have been for a long time using this form, this spiral form'.<sup>20</sup> It is this spiral form, typically seen in the swirls of coloured yarn and pins Samaras used, that finds its bodily counterpart in Samaras's ear, with which he intends to secure his place in history, as it is through the ear that he finds 'another connection with the past'.<sup>21</sup>

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The ephemerality of Nauman's *Westermann's Ear*, of the plaster that threatens to crumble away, the spiral of rope that will unravel at a single pull, and the transient quality of the pencil or charcoal sketches that easily rub or wash away in the accompanying sketches, have little in common of course, with the sturdy craftsmanship of Westermann's own sculptural practice.<sup>22</sup> Use of fragile, temporary

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<sup>19</sup> Lucas Samaras, as quoted in Kim Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, New York, 1975, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See chapter three for a detailed discussion of Westermann's working techniques and commitment to craftsmanship and professional finish in all his works in relation to the work of his contemporaries such as Rauschenberg. In chapter three I compare both Rauschenberg and Westermann's differing treatments of everyday objects, specifically the Coca Cola bottle motif that they both used.



materials did, however, play a large role in the formation of an aesthetic sensibility in California, specifically those artists associated with the San Francisco Bay Area where Nauman was at college and of which Wiley was a 'leading luminary'.<sup>23</sup> Of course, since the mid-fifties in New York artists such as Robert Rauschenberg had been putting together a variety of assemblages or 'combines' that drew upon everyday materials, throw-away junk and recycled fabrics, as we saw in chapter two. Claiming that '[a] pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric'.<sup>24</sup> Rauschenberg was raising the stakes for a re-negotiation of the found object that not only displayed it, but re-cast it, using it as a medium, a means to an end, toward the construction of his large-scale combine assemblages. Rauschenberg's use of the readymade found its Duchampian twist in Jasper Johns's painted reliefs and collages, in which he would attach casts of body fragments, chairs, plates and brushes.

On the West coast, however, the Duchampian aspect of East Coast 'assemblage' art was more strongly tinged with Surrealism. Both Surrealism and Dada (specifically Duchamp), proved influential on the West coast at this time. Man Ray had settled in Hollywood between 1940 and 1951, exhibiting and lecturing extensively during his time in Los Angeles, and continued to provide a model for younger artists even after he left, culminating in his large retrospective in Los Angeles in 1966 at which Nauman and Wiley first saw *The Enigma of Isadore Ducasse* and thought of Westermann. Joseph Cornell was another artist revered by the Californian art community, and his box constructions influenced a wide range of artists. Thanks largely to his patrons Walter and Louise Arensberg, whose home in Hollywood provided an unprecedented opportunity for contemporary artists to see so much of his work, Duchamp also became an important reference point for contemporary artists at this time.

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Levy, 'William T. Wiley', in *Forty Years of Californian Assemblage*, California, 1989, p. 222.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Rauschenberg, *Sixteen Americans*, New York, 1959, p. 58. Of course, Lee Bontecou was also very much engaged with the practice of recycling and reclaiming of materials which she incorporated into her own 'assemblage' reliefs.

During the forties, Julian Levy and William Copley, both instrumental to the display and dissemination of Surrealism, had opened galleries in Los Angeles. Cornell was included in many shows, such as Sidney Janis's 'Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States' held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1948, with a solo retrospective at the Pasadena Museum in 1967. Ensuring a complex mix of East coast assemblage, Surrealism and California's own brand of funk art, then, the pedigree of those artists working in the fifties and sixties was assured by the extensive array of both New York and European art practices that were so prevalent during their formative years, from which evolved a highly idiosyncratic, yet instantly recognisable Californian aesthetic, that the work of Westermann along with Wiley, Wallace Berman and Jeremy Anderson were seen to embody.<sup>25</sup>

Describing Anderson's 'visual rhetoric' of 'whimsical or poetic sentences carved into the redwood material', of 'emblems that appear and disappear', James Monte, writing for the 1967 exhibition 'American Sculpture of the Sixties', held at the Los Angeles Museum of Art, could just as easily have been describing the objects of Westermann, which are also referred to in his article.<sup>26</sup> Monte was describing the work of artists such as Anderson, Wiley, and Berman: artists that added an element of folksy kitsch to assemblage, what Monte described as 'bagless funk', the term used by jazz musicians to describe 'a sound or a look that is unsophisticated, powerful and draws

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<sup>25</sup> For more extensive accounts of West Coast art practices see *Forty Years of Californian Assemblage*, op.cit., and Diane Walden, *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object*, London, 1992. Many of these artists are often discussed as Pop, or Proto-Pop artists, as well as 'Neo-Dada'. I would suggest they also have strong ties with the so-called 'Nouveaux Réalistes' who published their manifesto in 1960, written by Pierre Restany. Artists in their first exhibition in Milan in May 1960 included Arman, Raymond Hains and Jean Tinguely. These artists, along with Martial Rayasse, Daniel Spoerri, Niki de Saint-Phalle and Christo were also associated with this new aesthetic as were the more established figures such as César and Yves Klein. Invoking the use of mass-produced products of society, and attacking the hegemony of American abstraction, these artists adopted a Dadaesque nihilism, united in terms of what they were against, with no shared formal appearance or model of working. See Alfred Pacquement, 'The Nouveaux Réalistes: The Renewal of Art in Paris around 1960', in *Pop Art*, Marco Livingstone ed., London, 1991, for a brief account of the movement.

<sup>26</sup> James Monte, 'Bagless Funk', in *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Maurice Tuchman ed., Los Angeles, 1967, p. 34.

deeply on folk tradition'.<sup>27</sup> Sharing Wiley's commitment to ephemeral materials, such as his rubber and felt strips and use of plastics and cardboard, what Nauman achieved, Monte claimed, was an elevation of the 'sculptural sketch' to the 'highest position'.<sup>28</sup> Connected to the working practices of his West coast contemporaries, yet infused with the 'new structural American sculpture', of New York, Monte is making the point that Nauman brought together in his work both East and West coast practices.<sup>29</sup> But if this is rather too neat a conclusion, the idea of a sculptural sketch is a very productive one from the point of view of this study.

Citing the importance of Westermann to this younger generation of West Coast artists, Monte writes '[e]ssentially Westermann's pieces are three-dimensional repositories of ideas'.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting that Monte describes Nauman's sculptures as 'sculptural sketches', as though the casual, or seemingly unfinished appearance of the roughly-cast fibreglass or deflated folds of fabric were in some way preliminary to the completed work. Nauman has claimed, '[m]ost of the drawings I make are to help me figure out the problems of a particular piece I'm working on'.<sup>31</sup> Nauman's drawing practice has been described by Fideli Danieli, who, in the first important and serious article on Nauman's work pointed out that '[o]ften the drawings are executed after a concept has been executed as a sculpture, with the desire to fully terminate it, as well as to develop other variants and to pass on new ideas'.<sup>32</sup> In his notes and drawings, Danieli claims that Nauman researches, amplifies and condenses ideas, veering from the explanatory to the 'boldly cartoonish', again, a description that just as easily suits the illustrated letters of Westermann to Allan Frumkin, which ranged from beautifully executed, detailed instructions of how a piece would be constructed

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Nauman, as quoted in Christopher Cordes, 'Talking with Bruce Nauman', in *Bruce Nauman: Prints 1970-1989*, New York, 1989, pp. 22-34.

<sup>32</sup> Fideli A. Danieli, 'The Art of Bruce Nauman', *Artforum*, December 1967, vol.5, no.4, pp. 15-19.

to rather more whimsical drawings that incorporated sketches of his planned sculptures as though in a cartoon.<sup>33</sup>

This is a rather more interesting way of thinking about the 'sculptural sketch'. Instead of its situation as prior to the completed object, for Danieli a temporal shift renders it instead fulfilling a desire to resolve the piece after the fact.<sup>34</sup> The sculpture is not always, then, the finished result or resolution of a piece, but an ongoing process of working-through. Rather than being the 'three-dimensional repositories of ideas' that Monte claims to be the case for Westermann, for Nauman, the sculptural sketch, as both descriptive term for the unfixability or ephemerality of the object, and as two-dimensional drawing, proves vital to an understanding of the sculpture. Coosje van Bruggen understands Nauman's sketches as prior to the three-dimensional object. She situates his practice as very much part of its time, with the claim that for Nauman 'drawing is like thinking', implying its role as process, a working-through of problems before they are realised in plastic form.<sup>35</sup>

I want to return now to his sketch *Large Knot Becoming an Ear (Knot Hearing Well)* not in terms of its being either prior to or after the fact of the sculpture *Westermann's Ear*, but as a remarkable work in its own right, which sheds light on the sculptural work it was produced in conjunction with. This drawing retains an element of literal representation that points to a more recognisable bodily element than is present in the final piece. In this drawing, a long vertical drop of rope has been scratchily

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> The complex issue of an artist's drawing, particularly its role in relation to three-dimensional sculpture, as the 'preparatory sketch' is one that needs further work. The assumption that a drawing is prior to, or an appendage of, a three-dimensional object becomes muddled somewhat in relation to the work of Lucas Samaras also, whose 'warped box' drawings I discuss in chapter one. Rather than being schematic plans for realisation in three dimensions, Samaras's drawings of boxes listing and bending are sketchy analogues to his heavily worked, rigid boxes that he was constructing contemporaneously. Reversing the usual notion of the 'working drawing', these sketches seem out of place, somehow, in his oeuvre. See chapter one for a comparison of Samaras's box drawings with those made by Eva Hesse, specifically her 'working drawings' completed *after* the construction of certain works that she asked Mel Bochner and Sol LeWitt to help her make. This is discussed briefly in *Eva Hesse*, Elisabeth Sussmann ed., San Francisco, 2002, p. 214.

<sup>35</sup> van Bruggen, op.cit., p. 109.

pencilled-in, coiled into a large reef knot in the middle. This drawing clearly derives from the sculpted section of carefully filed, planed and polished plywood that is shaped into a sinewy, elegant knot in Westermann's six foot tall plywood piece, *The Big Change*.

*The Big Change* has been carved from a block of laminated plywood which has been meticulously planed and smoothed into shape. The twists and different levels of plywood that are revealed bear a striking resemblance to the weft of thickly coiled rope, the most obvious choice of material if making a knot, as well as suggesting the grain of a cross-section of wood. Perhaps the 'big change' of the title refers to that switch or 'change' from wood to rope, the impossibility of 'tying' wood contradicted by the plywood's resemblance to a thick section of rope.<sup>36</sup> As well as presenting the absurdly elegant proposition of a large piece of knotted wood, a play on the fact that one finds so-called knots in cut sections of wood, there is an anthropomorphic element to *The Big Change*. The thickly coiled knotted centre evokes a pair of loosely folded arms, a relaxed pose echoing Westermann's pose in the photograph, cropped by Blake for the Beatles album cover, of Westermann standing next to the work. The *personnage* element of the work, emphasised here by both its humanoid height and placement next to the artist of course has echoes across Westermann's oeuvre, in which the assemblage/*personnage* model is repeated, often with one or no arms depicted, as though end-of-the-pier one-armed bandits, or silenced, immobilised figures. In another work entitled *Imitation Knotty Pine* (Ill. 4.18) from 1966, Westermann made a wooden hinged box, again from laminated plywood, and stuck cut-out pictures of knots from a section of wood to the sides. Of course plywood does not have knots in it, so Westermann's gag works in two ways: playing on the fact that the knots are not real yet the wood they are adhered to is, he toys with expectations of illusion and reality whilst the choice of plywood to construct the box

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<sup>36</sup> See chapter three for a discussion of the ways in which Westermann deployed polychrome materials. In relation to this, I also discuss the ways in which he uses one medium to 'stand for' another, as well as one kind of object or motif to 'stand for' another in order to expand the possibilities of meaning within a limit set of resources.

demonstrates its very un-woodlike aspect, free from visible woodgrain and especially the gnarled knots found in other woods.

In Nauman's drawing, *Large Knot Becoming an Ear (Knot Hearing Well)*, the central knot of *The Big Change* is reconfigured as a length of rope, with the twisted weave of the twine heavily marked, particularly at the bottom of the knot, as it is pulled back through the main vertical drop. Toward the top of the reef knot, however, a faint shadow of pencil is evident, arching over, away from the left-hand side of the knot and curving into the unmistakable curvilinear outline of the auricle of an ear; anchored as such by the faintly marked grooves and central black hollow of the ear hole that melds back into the knotted rope form. Whilst identifiable at the top left of the central bunch of pencilled rope, the sketched-in ear loses some of its specificity further down. The drawing of the rope succeeds the bodily representation of an ear, metamorphosing half-way down from the suggestively bodily to the heavily marked materiality of rope, remaindering the literal ear shape so that it lingers only as faint outline.

Placed together, the pencil drawing of the ear and its three-dimensional counterpart *Westermann's Ear* move between the abstractly evocative and the figurative and literal. Closely linked to *The Big Change*, with the ear/knot of the drawing strongly echoing the knotted centre of Westermann's work, this drawing and sculpture look back to the recent past of Westermann's sculpture, indelibly marking it in the present with an element of the body. This loss or substitution of body parts that occurs in Nauman's 'Westermann' homage series, where his own bodily presence is used to stand for 'Westermann', and where a section of rope can be both a bodily part-object and lumpen knotted material appears persistently across Nauman's homages, as we saw in his graduate school work *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists*. Just as the switching or doubling of materials appears as a repeated motif in Westermann's system of bricolage, so we see Nauman also working with the malleability of materials and forms. The question is, to what ends does he take on

Westermann's own system? Is it a form of stylistic borrowing, or 'poaching' to borrow de Certeau's term, a prime example of Nauman the post-modern heterogeneous artist *par excellence*, or isn't it more that this is the only way Nauman has of working out Westermann, by somehow having first of all to work through him?

A lesser known sculpture by Nauman *Knot an Ear* (Ill. 4.19) from 1967 renders literally the sketchy implications of *Large Knot Becoming an Ear (Knot Hearing Well)*. A short section of thick rope has been coiled into a knot, to which wax has been moulded into an ear formation, creating a curious object out of the intersection between knotted rope and the curved contours of an ear. The rope remains visible at both the centre and top of the knot/ear, a switch between the sheer materiality of the rope and the physicality of the body echoing both Westermann's earlier *The Big Change* as well as Nauman's (and, of course, Westermann's) own confusion of registers. Oddly inert, this severed ear/knot is an unsettling part-object which, wrested from the body and cut off from its original length of rope seems to articulate, in its most graphic form, Nauman and Wiley's earlier attempts to 'get Westermann's ear' through establishing contact with Westermann. Captured in plaster and severed from the body, this is an uncomfortable object that sits uneasily within Nauman's usual repertoire of casting, stretching, pulling and twisting parts of his body into various media and directions to almost abstract ends. Here, the ear remains inert, fixed and deafened in its block of hardened plaster like the central knot of wood at the centre of *The Big Change*.

The switch of register between the aural and the visual has been explored by historian Linda Haverty Rugg as a way of negotiating the 'textual resonances' between photographs in her discussion of the *bilder* or 'word images' used by Walter Benjamin which function as literary 'snapshots'.<sup>37</sup> Rugg is interested in the ways in which readers or viewers might 'listen' for those resonances typically gleaned from

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<sup>37</sup> Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography*, Chicago, 1997.

visual information. Interestingly it is specifically the ear through which Rugg pursues her point, comparing Benjamin's account of the staged photographs taken of himself and his brother as young children with his description of a similarly staged photograph taken ten years earlier of the young Franz Kafka. In the photograph of Kafka, Benjamin notices his rather prominent ear that sticks out from the side of his head, as though Kafka were straining to listen to his surroundings. This is not the first time, Rugg points out, that Benjamin invoked the metaphor of the ear in his writing. On another occasion, Benjamin describes his own historical task as though having his ear pressed against the shell of the nineteenth century. In his writing about these two photographs—the one of himself and his brother and that of the young boy Kafka—Rugg points out that Benjamin conflates the two images, at the same time confusing the registers of the visual and the aural as both historical means of understanding, or 'hearing' history. The idea of Benjamin's ear as a kind of 'other' to history's narrative of course shares much with Derrida's concept of the 'otobiography' in which he, too, emphasises the importance of the listening ear (oto-'of the ear'). Derrida claims that Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* is an example of an otobiography, that is, as a text which is dependent, structured, even, upon the listening 'ear of the other'. We identify the true place of autobiography, he writes, as not under the control of the 'signer' or writer of the text, but in the 'ear of the other', the subject who listens, the 'other' listener to the text than the author.<sup>38</sup>

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When Nauman commented on the enigmatic quality of his work and titles in 1972, he referred not to Westermann but to Duchamp, an often-cited influence on Nauman's work. His interest in Duchamp 'has to do with his use of objects to stand for ideas'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference*, Christie V. McDonald ed., and Peggy Kamuf trans., New York, 1985. See also Derrida's foreword 'Fors' in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolfman's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, Nicholas Rand trans., Minneapolis, 1986.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Nauman, unpublished interview with Lorraine Sciarra, as quoted in Serota, *Bruce Nauman*, London, 1987, op.cit, p. 11.



What he claims to share with Duchamp is a common interest in language, and, more specifically, I would suggest, with Duchamp's own fondness for bad gags, a trait common to both Duchamp, Nauman and Westermann. Nauman claims that he seeks to 'put ideas into the works—mainly to put language into the work'.<sup>40</sup> This would suggest that the titles selected to anchor his object-ideas are a crucial element of his work. However, Nauman was also keen to distance himself from that Duchampian tradition, acknowledging that although the work and ideas of artists such as Jasper Johns and Jim Dine were 'in the air' at the time, 'things like Duchamp's Green Box I didn't know about at all', in fact, one of the few sources of influence Nauman does acknowledge in his work is that of Westermann.<sup>41</sup>

What intrigues Nauman more than tracking his works' genesis, however, is the disintegration of logic played out in the enigmatic objects of an artist such as Man Ray, whom he preferred to Duchamp because 'there's less "tied-upness" in his work, more unreasonableness'.<sup>42</sup> It is not so much an opacity of meaning that is sought, but an ambiguity: to not be tied down, to be unreasonable, to work in the face of reason, a kind of unravelling of the spiral. In these rope and body-part drawings, sketches, and sculptures, Nauman brings together his own disintegrating logic of the body with the illogical tying of a rope that comes undone, and an ear that cannot-knot-hear. Nauman's choice of titles in these works plays on the dual meaning of the word 'k/not' as both statement of negation and point of securing, a word-pun evoking not only Duchamp but, more specifically, Westermann's own titles. Each of these artists had a fondness for incorporating humour into their work, whether as visual gags, or linguistic puns in the title.

Depending on your reading of the title *Westermann's Ear*, Nauman could be jokingly referring to the vernacular, slangy language of Westermann's own speech and objects, a pun on whether the artist is 'ere, that is 'here', or is not, that is, absent.

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<sup>40</sup> Bruce Nauman, as quoted in Livingstone, *Bruce Nauman*, 1987, op.cit., p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

However, the parenthetical title of the drawing *Large Knot Becoming an Ear* , ‘Knot hearing well’, fixes its meaning firmly in the realm of the ear-as-body-part. Of course the ambiguity of its reading as ‘knot’ or ‘not’ renders the meaning of the phrase ‘k/not hearing well’ as either positive or negative statement of being (as well as a terrible joke). The ear is either deaf, or the knotty lump of rope can hear. Deliberately confusing the two registers of inert medium and bodily function, the ear and the knot both switch positions and occupy the same one. Levelling out differences between the two, Nauman is establishing a point of equivalence between the material facture of the sculpture and the physical attribute of the ear, here understood as belonging to, or standing for, ‘Westermann’. Reducing one to the other, Westermann is both represented here through ‘his’ ear, which is Nauman’s, of course, as a bodily presence, and absented from the field of vision through his metonymic displacement and substitution with the rope. As well as connoting Westermann’s own use of rope in his work, the rope also, of course, obliquely signifies Westermann’s biography, specifically his naval training and knowledge of various knots and rope-tying. What Nauman is also doing here, is both invoking and working through myriad associative references, materials and illusions which, in Nauman’s case means that even ‘Westermann’ himself becomes one of those many meanings secreted within the object, as though Westermann himself takes on multiple signifying potentialities.

Other works in this group homages by Nauman from 1967, are two charcoal on paper drawings of entwined rope shaped into a loose knot with a pair of folded arms at the bottom, entitled respectively *Square Knot (H.C. Westermann)* and *Untitled (Square Knot)*. A three-dimensional version was also constructed from rope, wax and plaster called simply *Untitled*. In *Square Knot (H.C. Westermann)*, the drawn rope is in a double tie, outlining a loosely formed reef knot, with the lower drop morphing into a pair of folded arms, crossed to complete the square outline the rope hangs in. *Untitled (Square Knot)* follows the format of the former drawing, although instead of a reef knot one continuous loop of rope is presented, looping over to form an angular

square-shaped 'handle', culminating in a pair of crossed arms at the bottom. In this drawing the folded arms register more obviously as 'like' the rope than in the first drawing.

Nauman is performing a metonymic substitution in these works, with the knots and thick twine standing for Westermann the sailor, an integral element of the 'Westermann' myth. These in turn come to stand 'for' Westermann's body, the hands and arms that made his meticulous hand-crafted pieces. The humour of the piece lies also in the large, rubbery, muscular arms that, as well as signifying Westermann the artist and craftsman, also stand for Westermann the sailor in a jokey, exaggerated way, precisely that aspect which had been played up by Westermann in many of his own works, and mediated here via a cartoonish model of 'Popeye the Sailor Man'.

Unlike his better-known body cast *From Hand to Mouth* (Ill. 4.20) from 1967, in which a cast has been made of the side of a body from the mouth through the shoulder to the hand, as though a strip of flesh has been peeled away and cast in wax, Nauman has moulded *Untitled*, the final, three-dimensional work in the *Square Knot* group, from plaster rather than cast it directly from a body. *From Hand to Mouth* is often described as a cast taken from the side of Nauman's body, but in fact it was a cast from Nauman's wife, Judy. This is different to the more 'Popeye' aspect of the arms that stand 'as' Westermann. The arms which anchor *Untitled* at the bottom are plaster, located firmly by Nauman in the realm of the bodily. A reef knot features again in this version, pulled taut and closely bonded: left over right and right over left, a double-binding knot ensuring the piece remains as tightly knit and enclosed as the wax-sealed plaster arms that anchor it. This work has been described as a 'closed system,' circular in physical design and in figurative implication'.<sup>43</sup> Jane

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<sup>43</sup> Livingstone, *Bruce Nauman*, op.cit., p. 14.

Livingstone has understood the crossed arms as articulating 'a negation of the hand of the artist,' a deliberate, self-imposed paralysis.<sup>44</sup>

However, this is no straightforward negation. By constricting the arms in a folded position, they are all tied-up. Although not cast directly from his own body, the representation of a male pair of arms does suggest Nauman is implicated in the piece, and, therefore, that Nauman cannot be fully erased from the image. Instead what has happened is that Westermann now takes centre stage 'as' Nauman's own body. Another twist in this complex homage is that, by dropping both the title *Square Knot* and the parenthetical title (*H.C. Westermann*) from the final piece, which is now called simply *Untitled*, both the implicit reference to Westermann (the knot) and explicit reference to him (his name) have been excised. In this object, and the two drawings in which the name 'Square Knot' and Westermann's name are toyed with, Nauman has encrypted Westermann within the work, secreted him within the finished untitled piece.

By losing the explicit identification of the work with Westermann, Nauman creates a work that is just as enigmatic as any object either Westermann or, for that matter, Man Ray made. When describing the reference to the now-excised parenthetical heading (*H.C. Westermann*) in *Untitled*, Nauman said he was referring to Westermann's work 'Square Knot', although the piece he was actually describing was *The Big Change*. It seems that Nauman confused Westermann's own work with that of his own through this slip of the tongue, which reveals layers of this homage that find Westermann so impacted within the piece Nauman cannot dislodge him. Whilst it is not explicit as a homage, the visual signs enact the operation of homage. The folded arms in *Untitled* that have no fixed 'owner', indicate that there is a curious conflation of Nauman with Westermann taking place, as though one is here standing for the other. Westermann's haunting of Nauman's work is enacted through the embodiment of Nauman's body, which functions now as a kind of ventriloquist's

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

puppet through whom Westermann may 'speak'. Knotting, as a way of holding together and strengthening, in both *Square Knot* and *Westermann's Ear*, becomes more like a gagging or disabling device, that restricts, not secures; isolates, rather than joins together. Binding is understood in this instance as a form of concealing or secreting, a strategy which is also used to great effect in Nauman's series of homages to Henry Moore, which demonstrate a body captured and bound, or spirit trapped. I will return to these shortly.

In another set of homage works of sorts, Nauman also employed that strategy of binding. Originally posted to his friend and ex-tutor William Allan, with whom Nauman had collaborated on a number of film works, *Letter to Bill Allan: Three Well-Known Knots (Square Knot, Bowline, and Clove Hitch)* (Ill. 4.21) from 1967, consists of a series of three photographs of Nauman binding his torso in three different types of knot. These photographs are both a nod to the pseudo-instructional tone of their films such as *Fishing for Asian Carp* (1966) as well as Nauman's own knot-tying skills which were a leftover from his Boy Scout days. These photos are understood in both the Nauman catalogue raisonné and Coosje van Bruggen's book on Nauman not as a humorous 'in joke' or homage to Allan, but instead as referring to his other, more familiar series of homages to Moore.<sup>45</sup> Allan himself also made a number of works that implicitly refer to Westermann, including another of his short films titled *Untying the Knots in the Reel*, another quotation of the knot, this time, interestingly, mediated *through* the work of Nauman. A large painting by Allan, depicting a pair of empty boots and jeans that are silhouetted against a mountainscape, titled *Shadow Repair for the Western Man* is, claims critic John Fitz Gibbon, another previously unacknowledged homage to Westermann.<sup>46</sup>

One reason why these three photos for Allan are always looked at in relation to the homages to Henry Moore is because in the same session (and wearing the same

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<sup>45</sup> See van Bruggen, op.cit, and Benezra et al. *Bruce Nauman*, op.cit.

<sup>46</sup> John Fitz Gibbon, as quoted in *H.C. Westermann: WEST*, op.cit., p. 63.

outfit) Nauman took a photograph of himself bound up in rope, which he called *Bound to Fail* (Ill. 4.22), which shares the title with Nauman's *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* series of casts, and which also takes the form of a drawing by Moore from 1942 featuring an object bound-up in rope. What all of these photos share, however, is the way in which the body is bound up and tied, immobilised or 'silenced' in a way similar to the crossed rope/arms of the *Square Knot* works. These photographs also share with the Westermann homages a preoccupation with the severance of the body, presented only in parts. We do not see Nauman's face, only part of his torso, clad in a chunky knit sweater.

Because Nauman completed his series of homages to Westermann and Moore straight after graduating from art school, it is tempting to look at them in terms of their being a 'working through' or means of establishing difference, so that Nauman might 'discover' his own way of working. With Westermann this may seem plausible even, with Moore less so. Nauman's homage to Westermann, an artist to whom he 'listened' intently, inherited in part from his tutor and friend Wiley, as well as several other members of his immediate peer group, demonstrates the critical problems and high esteem his work held amongst this younger generation, whose works Westermann haunts.<sup>47</sup> What could Henry Moore mean to a young Californian artist in 1966? Moore stood for a kind of sculpture that was too over-blown and grandiose to the new generation of modern sculptors, although, as Anne Wagner has pointed out, Moore was at the height of his American fame in 1966, the year Nauman graduated, with public commissions in New York, and honorary doctorates awarded him at Yale University (he had already received one from Harvard in 1958) and at the University of Chicago one year later, in 1967. With the death of David Smith in 1965, Wagner asks, 'what other sculptor could have been cast in the father figure's

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<sup>47</sup> The centrality of Westermann's work to other less mainstream artists, particularly those on the West coast should not be underestimated. From his precarious grouping with the younger generation of Chicago artists, the 'Chicago Imagists' and the 'Hairy Who' group, such as Jim Knutt, etc., his presence has been felt and recognised within the art community since he first began exhibiting in the late fifties. Amongst Nauman's contemporaries, Westermann was admired as a practitioner, and is remembered personally as a fiercely responsible, loyal and committed person and artist.

role' than Moore?<sup>48</sup> And, although Moore's large, carved maternal figures, commitment to form and truth to materials must have been an anathema to the new sculptors, after Smith he was the most obvious contender as main player in what Wagner describes as an 'Oedipal drama' of sculptural inheritance and continuation.<sup>49</sup>

Nauman's generation reduced the monumental to the contingent and ephemeral, shifting the emphasis from the universal to the everyday in their sculptural objects that would seem to be the opposite of all that Moore stood for. I think, however, Nauman's engagement with Moore was not simply to ridicule, or oppose him, nor do I think Nauman's response is related to an Oedipal battle that demands he must compete with Moore, or totally negate him. Rather, the situation is more complex than that. As Wagner points out, what is remarkable is how Nauman manages to avoid employing any of Moore's 'subjects or qualities' whilst 'apparently proposing "the artist" quite directly' in this series of works, as though Moore is no longer needed.<sup>50</sup> He is 'using Moore' at the same time he arrives at a new sculptural idiom that *does not need* him.

I do not want to propose these homages to Moore and Westermann as opposites, as though Nauman were trying to steer a course between Westermann the cultish dadaesque carpenter and Moore the old-fashioned dinosaur steeped in a humanist tradition. An examination of the Moore homages demonstrates that the seeming gulf between Westermann's and Moore's practices is not so neatly distinct, nor as clearly oppositional as we might at first imagine. Although on the one hand these works are an example of Nauman's irreverent humour and idiosyncratic take on the stable order of things, there is, I argue, something more at stake here. Nauman was already an accomplished and eclectic artist by the time he graduated. He had his first solo exhibition only a few years after leaving college, in 1968 (in which both his

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<sup>48</sup> Anne M. Wagner, 'Henry Moore's Mother', *Representations*, no. 65, Winter 1999, pp. 93-120, p. 93.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

sculptural homages to Westermann and Moore were shown), and he was friends with some of the leading contemporary Californian artists. The two sets of works Nauman made 'in the name of' Westermann and Moore both arrive at their subjects through oblique means. Nauman 'gets to' Westermann through Man Ray and, later, a photograph of Westermann standing next to his *The Big Change*, whilst he arrives at Moore, not through his large-scale monumental public sculptures, as we might expect, but through Moore's drawings, which Nauman engaged with via his own lesser-known skills as draughtsman.

The works in the series of homages to Henry Moore are Nauman's study for *Henry Moore Trap*, (Ill. 4.23) his *Seated Storage Capsule (for H.M.)* (Ill. 4.24) and *Seated Storage Capsule for H.M. Made of Metallic Plastic*, (Ill. 4.25) the *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* series of wax and cast iron sculptures, sketches and photographs, and his *Light Trap for Henry Moore 1* and *2* (Ill. 4.26) alongside one of Moore's own drawings, his enigmatic *Crowd Looking at a Tied-Up Object* (Ill. 4.27), from 1942. This drawing by Moore is one of his better-known works on paper, which appears oddly out of place alongside his famous series of 'shelter drawings' of Londoners sleeping in the tube stations, produced whilst he was an official war artist under the War Artists Advisory Commission. *Crowd Looking at a Tied-Up Object* is, in fact, more in tune with Moore's sculptural interests of the thirties, when he became involved with a surreal mode of working that, in this instance, spirals back to the concerns of Nauman and Wiley and their fascination with Man Ray's tied-up object.

*Crowd Looking at a Tied-Up Object* features, as the title states, a large, wrapped object, bound with rope, which has caught the attention of a crowd of people below. The contents of the tied-up object are not revealed, which, whilst inserting this drawing exactly into the wider context of the thematic of this thesis, points also to another, interesting aspect of Moore's practice as it caught Nauman's attention here. What Nauman taps into, through this drawing by Moore, is a rather more 'private' language at work than is typically associated with Moore the 'public' sculptor. It is



the 'private' language, or enigma of this wrapped secret object that Wiley and Nauman also identified in Man Ray, and because of which they contacted Westermann. It may be this recognition of a 'private', or secret language which points to the shared status of both Moore and Westermann at this time as somehow out of place in the contemporary sculptural scene, although Westermann's position is rather more marginal than the position of mere out-dated retrograde that Moore was attributed. Whilst it initially appears as though the two artists are placed at opposite ends of a gulf, (whether Moore and Westermann, or Nauman and Moore), the two end up being rather more closely entwined. Instead of standing at either end of a sculptural divide, the figures of Westermann and Moore are in fact used by Nauman to explore similar themes. Both Moore and Westermann 'stand for' something in Nauman's work, and it is that 'something' I am keen to uncover here.

Nauman wry explanation for his reference to Moore was that younger artists should be less dismissive of Moore's practice. Nauman claimed they 'shouldn't be so hard on him, because they're going to need him'.<sup>51</sup> In conversation with Coosje van Bruggen, Nauman elaborated on this, saying 'I figured the younger sculptors would need him some day, so I came up with the idea for a storage capsule'.<sup>52</sup> Nauman may have been joking but there is a serious point here, witnessed by the growing interest in Moore's work by writers such as Wagner. The point is, at this time, Moore was simply out of kilter with the contemporary sculptural field, and no self-respecting sculptor would recognise anything in Moore's practice that they associated with their own.<sup>53</sup> Of course, to place Moore at the centre of his work at this time was a classic

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<sup>51</sup> Bruce Nauman, as quoted in Willoughby Sharp, 'Two Interviews', [1970], reprinted in Robert C. Morgan ed., *Art and Performance: Bruce Nauman*, Baltimore and London, 2002, p. 246.

<sup>52</sup> Bruce Nauman, as quoted in van Bruggen, op.cit., p. 110.

<sup>53</sup> Wagner writes that Nauman was right in 'his assertion that Moore's idea of the sculpted body, if it was worth negating, might also be worth exhuming again some day, right too in his oblique suggestion that bodily uncanniness is somehow at stake. This essay assumes that the time has come'. (p. 94) In a footnote, Wagner draws our attention to an interview that took place between Dan Graham and his interviewers Ronald Alley and Richard Morphet in London, October 1974, Tate Gallery Archives. Responding to a question about Nauman's influence on his own work, Graham responded, 'I mean Nauman, Nauman was influenced by Henry Moore, if you can believe that, and he says Henry Moore is going to come back [...] Oh it's very very...Nauman's very humorous and he put that out because

Nauman manoeuvre, to turn the situation on its head and suddenly make Henry Moore the subject of his own practice is a typically subversive gesture. The humour in the situation, his claiming that artists may well need Moore in the future, finds its visual counterpart in Nauman's surreal, faintly disturbing sketches of seated, bound figures, veiled in a shroud of pencil or crayon lines, a pastiche of Moore's own heavy 'section-line' drawing which is seen clearly in his shelter drawings.<sup>54</sup> In certain of Nauman's drawings, the swooping lines which encircle the concealed form within, have 'hardened' into what Nauman describes in one title as a 'metallic plastic capsule', a storage capsule to be saved for the future, preserved in the present in case its contents (Moore?) might be 'useful' later on.

Nauman's 'light trap' series of photographs from 1967 lend this suggestion a futuristic element of magical transformation. To make these, he drew in the air with a torch, capturing the image on film as though picturing the ghostly presence of Moore. When Nauman made his *Light Trap* photographs, they were intended as part of a larger project that also included *William T. Wiley or Ray Johnson Trap*, and which were initially planned as neons. *Light Trap for Henry Moore No.1* and *Light Trap for Henry Moore No. 2* are large prints that required Nauman make an extra-large developing tray for them. Drawing in the air with a flashlight, Nauman threw a huge light spiral line into the air which, caught on film, are a dazzling counterpart to the pencil sketches outlining bound figures. *Light Trap for Henry Moore No. 2* is similar to *Light Trap for Henry Moore No. 1*, although the light outlines a much tighter space, with the spirals of light drawn much closer together. Again resembling a

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Moore may have been the most degraded figure in modern sculpture as far as Americans were concerned, as a humorous point of reference.' (Wagner, op.cit., p. 115, footnote 2.) Wagner's article, about Moore's depiction of his mother in his works, is part of a larger project on British sculpture and the maternal that she is currently working on. Opening her article with Nauman's works about Moore, and his claims that Moore's time will come, Wagner decides to take Nauman at his word, to acknowledge that the time has come to finally return to Moore, and see what can be 'salvaged' from his sculptural practice (p. 94).

<sup>54</sup> Nauman recognised his connection to Moore in terms of their drawing strategies, when he claimed he liked the 'heavy-handed' aspect of Moore's drawing. He stated, 'I liked that about those drawings, that he always had to struggle to get them right. My drawings have always been like that—I've always had to beat them into shape as much as anything else'. Nauman as quoted in van Bruggen, op.cit., p. 111.

figure drawn in light, this image appears as though a supernatural light is emitted, suggestive of a 'spirit' or some kind of trapped after-effect. Due to the size of these images, however, they could not satisfactorily be wholly submerged in the developing trays, and so Nauman and his assistant instead set about smearing and spreading the solution over the paper by hand, a neat inversion of the supposedly transcendental aspect the images seemingly lay claims to. These photographs engage with the ridiculous, magical idea that a spirit can be 'trapped' on film, as well as marking a complicated temporal adjustment to the typical notion of the homage, as Moore, like Westermann, was still of course very much alive in 1967.<sup>55</sup>

In a gesture referencing Westermann's use of bad gags and humour in his titles and sculptures, Nauman's *Bound to Fail* works operate on a number of levels, (including that of the bad gag) and it is through these, Nauman's best-known 'homage' works, that his strategy is most overtly staged. A charcoal sketch of the sculpture *Bound to Fail* from 1966 shows the rear view of a figure, with arms tied behind the back by a double length of rope. In the cast-iron version of this from the following year, of which he made a series of nine editions, Nauman pressed one of his own sweaters into a mould, complete with the loosely-bound rope, in order to create the impression, quite literally, of a trapped figure (Ill. 4.28). Nauman also cast this work in wax, perhaps a nod to the antiformal tendencies of sixties sculpture, bringing together in the same work, and in the 'name of' Moore, the more traditional method of casting in metal, with the process of casting in wax, a medium rediscovered during the sixties as something to cast the final object *in*, rather than as an intermediary material to cast something else *from*. In this cast, unlike the muscular folded arms of 'Westermann' in *Untitled*, the body is not represented, instead only the folds of the sweater and weave of the rope are visible. Whilst in *Untitled* the arms are folded in front, as though a defensive or controlled pose, with the muscular forearms and relaxed grip of

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<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, one year later in 1967, Dan Flavin also used light in his *Untitled (Homage to V. Tatlin)*. Using industrial fluorescent light tubes mounted directly onto the wall in a pyramid of strips echoing the form of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* from 1920, itself a homage dedicated to previous revolutionary monumental practice.

the hands clearly identifiable, *Bound to Fail* instead seems to reverse that pose, with the limp suggestion of arms tied behind the figures' back, in a gesture of futility or entrapment.

Between *Untitled* and *Bound to Fail*, Nauman appears to be staging the disjuncture, as he sees it, between these two artists' practices, mediated via his own staged presence in each work; although what Nauman ends up doing is to bring the two closer together, *through* that very staging of the two as somehow worlds apart. By implicating himself within this scenario, Nauman ends up, ultimately, all tied-up. What seems to be going on here, is less Nauman working through Moore, or for that matter Westermann, but rather, Nauman looking at Moore *through* Westermann (via Man Ray). This characteristically opaque series of connections throws up rather more similarities than may have been intended. What Nauman ends up with is a conundrum—another enigma to solve—which is, the *problem* the figure of 'Henry Moore' poses to sculptural practice, a problem that persists, locked into a storage capsule to be worked through at a later date. As Nauman claimed, the name 'Henry Moore' could be dropped from the piece, and it would still work just as well. The point is, although Moore serves his purpose now, this is not about Nauman's specific engagement with the work of Moore, but rather an exploration of the mechanics of sculptural inheritance, staged in this instance as a strategy, not genealogy. For now, any engagement with Moore's practice is, simply, bound to fail. He is instead wrapped up and passed on, a problem for later generations who may, as Nauman said, 'need him', for a time when, as Wagner writes, 'Moore's main themes need no longer be kept in quarantine'.<sup>56</sup>

These homages draw attention to the unlikely sequences and connections that determine, in another context, the non-linear, non-developmental haunting presence of Abraham's 'transgenerational phantom', as a 'conceptual possibility' that provides the means through which to establish links, rather than a 'prescriptive model for

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<sup>56</sup> Wagner, op.cit., p. 96.

interpretation' that explains (away) what those links are.<sup>57</sup> Rather than staging an Oedipal battle between fathers and sons, in these works, Nauman could be seen rather as self-consciously reflecting on the strategy of the transgenerational phantom. The point is not that the homages to Moore and Westermann are opposite, but that, for all their differences, they ultimately end up performing the same strategy.

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In 1987, twenty years after Nauman's homages to Moore and Westermann (and Wiley and Johnson and Allan and, of course Man Ray), and the same year as Nauman's retrospective show at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, British artist Rachel Whiteread began to make her plaster and resin casts of everyday objects, specifically the 'spaces' underneath, around or between objects, creating casts of negative space, just as Nauman had done between 1966 and 1968 in his work entitled *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* (Ill. 4.29). It is not, however, Whiteread's already well-documented castings of absent space, such as *Wardrobe* from 1987, that I want to focus on here, but rather a moment just prior to these objects, a small group of works made in 1986. During this year, whilst still at art school, Whiteread made a series of plaster casts of her own body, specifically, of her back and of her ear.

It is these works that tell us much more about Whiteread's often commented-on connection to Nauman than those more obvious homages such as *Table and Chair (Clear)* from 1994 (Ill. 4.30) in which she cast the negative space underneath household furniture. In both Nauman and Whiteread's early stages as artists, whilst still at art school, the seeds of their later work were already set in place. Understood only retrospectively, it is interesting to note that both Nauman's early homage series, initiated whilst still at art school and Whiteread's body casts, also made whilst a student, in which she makes casts of present not absent spaces, share an engagement

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<sup>57</sup> Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative*, Princeton, 1992 p. 157.

with the ear, both literally and metaphorically, as each begins to develop their own interests, through listening to the voices and influence of others.

The idea of homage features in both these artists' work, although Whiteread's connection to Nauman and Minimalism is more often acknowledged than Nauman's lesser-known set of homage works about Westermann. As van Bruggen put it, '[a]rt about art of this kind is unusual for him. He prefers to pace his own studio rather than follow in the footsteps of other artists'.<sup>58</sup> I am not claiming that Whiteread is more reliant on the work of other artists, but rather, that the often-cited influence upon her work of both Minimalism and Nauman are accepted by the artist and fairly consistently identifiable, although of course, she does something very different with each.

To make *Ear*, (Ill. 4.31) Whiteread coated her left ear with plaster, a messy process that left a trail of plaster down the side of her face, around the back of her neck and onto her shoulder. From this body cast a negative imprint of the ear was left in the soft plaster. Whiteread poured hot liquid wax into this hardened lump of plaster, filling the void in order to make a positive cast, a roughly moulded, yet nevertheless clearly identifiable ear. Wax is also the material Nauman used for *Knot an Ear*, itself a pun, as wax is also the stuff which the ear both secretes and is filled with. Rather than a cast of the 'negative space' of the ear, this is a clear demarcation of the ear in all its folds, contours and holes. Had Whiteread chosen to cast the negative space of her ear, the result would have been a thin, spindly spiral of wax, suggested here only through its absence.

The photograph of *Ear* depicts the lone ear resting on the floor, as though a fossil or a shell washed up on the shore. The photo has been taken on a sunny day, at a moment when the sun streams through the rectangular window frame of the studio, casting a grid of shadow over the image, bathing it in strong contrasting light, and fixing the

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<sup>58</sup> van Bruggen, op.cit., p. 111.

ear within a logic of the grid at odds with its own winding, spiral form. Recalling Smithson's description of *Spiral Jetty*, that other 'ear' trapped within a language of irrationality that causes a momentary swaying of one's fixed subject position, this cast ear breaks the logic of the linear grid it is photographed against. From the photograph of Whiteread's ear coated in plaster, to the one where the final cast has been made, Whiteread's casting process is tracked, as it has gone through both a negative and positive stage. Of course, the one is always implied in the other, as the bodily cast of an ear necessarily implies the process of negative casting that has been made, whilst the true inside space of the ear, the labyrinthine spiral tunnel through which sound reverberates and echoes, is lost, or silenced.

Both Nauman and Whiteread made works that involved separating the ear from the body. The difference in their works however, is that, in Whiteread's case, she presents an unsettling image, suggesting that a scene of damage has been staged, the aftermath of a violent act. In the case of *Ear*, the implied severance from the embodied presence of Whiteread results in an image at once oddly material and present, yet entrenched within a language of absence in which the missing body is keenly felt. In a way similar to the spare parts that Nauman also moulded and cast, Whiteread's *Ear* is rather more disconcerting in the kinds of violence it seems to stage. For example, an installation shot of Nauman's work from 1968 at the Leo Castelli Gallery (Ill. 4.32), which shows a number of his works such as *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* and the rope and cross-armed Westermann piece *Untitled* hung on the wall, whilst resembling a set of body parts reads rather as what has been described by Briony Fer as a metonymic chain of loose articulations from which the body has slipped, as opposed to the aftermath of an aggressive act.<sup>59</sup>

Describing her move from casting her own body parts to making casts of negative space, Whiteread explains that her interest and work is 'to do with absence not

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<sup>59</sup> Briony Fer, 'The Captive Imagination', unpublished paper.

presence'.<sup>60</sup> She ceased developing the 'direct relationship' of casting her own body in 1987, when she chose instead a less 'direct' encounter, where the sculptures 'refer to objects that we've designed for our bodies' rather than being actual casts of those bodies or, more specifically, her own body.<sup>61</sup> What is lost in the move from articulating presence to absence in these objects, then, is Whiteread's own positive, embodied presence. And it is this aspect of her early body casts that I want to emphasise here. What happens in the move from casting the actual space of the body to the implied place of its presence, in other words, the shift from casting positive to negative space? In what ways does Whiteread's excision from her work in these casts implicate her own practice in relation to the work of the homage in Nauman? What was at stake in Whiteread's loss of bodily presence in her own casts?

Between 1986 and 1987, Whiteread fashioned a plaster cast of her back into a shovel, *Untitled (Shovel)* conflating the everyday utilitarian nature of domestic tools with her body (Ill. 4.33). Evoking Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (Ill. 4.34), Westermann's *Dust Pan* series (Ill. 4.35), in which he carved personalised handles for a number of iron dust pans, and, of course, Nauman's *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* pieces, and deploying all three artists' use of punning titles (the notion of breaking one's back when performing physical labour such as shovelling), a compelling trajectory is traced in which a legacy of inheritance and influence, of Duchamp through Westermann who was adopted by Nauman by way of Man Ray, as renegotiated by Whiteread, can be charted in which homage provides the means for later artists' working-through. It is not, however, the cast of Whiteread's back that I want to isolate here, but another part-object, also from 1986; the plaster cast she made of her left ear, a bodily fragment that unwittingly echoes Nauman's use of the 'ear' in his homages to Westermann, specifically the small work *Knot an Ear*, and which might go some way to widening the debate within this chapter around notions of

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<sup>60</sup> Rachel Whiteread, in 'Rachel Whiteread interviewed by Andrea Rose, March 1997', in *Rachel Whiteread: British Pavilion XLVII, Venice Biennale 1997*, London, 1997, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



influence and homage to incorporate a wider scope, both generational and formal, of sculptural practice since the sixties.

Rather than exploring notions of absence, I want to ask how one artist might be 'found' in the work of another, as a persistent, haunting presence. This history of Duchamp through Westermann to Whiteread needs complicating, for it is not a consciously plotted linear or merely temporal genealogy that is the issue here, but a strategy of influence and inheritance that unconsciously repeats, returns and incorporates, as one artist listens for the echo, or closes their ears, to another artistic generation. Whether silencing one's predecessor, or listening for their voice, the phantomatic trajectory of haunting I want to map here is one that traces a spiralling, not straight, contour: a contour, that is, which echoes, and finds its embodiment, in the outline of the ear.

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When Benjamin Buchloh described Rachel Whiteread as an 'epigone' in his account of the demise of sculpture at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as mere pretender to the inheritance of Minimalism's throne, he unwittingly brought to the fore those issues of influence and haunting under examination here. Buchloh's claim is that by returning to recent historical sculptural models such as Minimalism and imbuing them with the 'retrograde appeal' of 'figuration and literariness', contemporary artists such as Whiteread and Kiki Smith eradicate the original radicality of that model, whether it be the emancipation of the viewer in the case of Minimalism, or the socio-political implications of post-Minimal, Process and 'non-site' works of art.<sup>62</sup> These artists have, Buchloh writes, 'emptied' their predecessors original successes.<sup>63</sup> It is not Buchloh's claim that Whiteread and Smith have

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Detritus and Decrepitude: The Sculpture of Thomas Hirschhorn', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2002, pp. 41-56, p. 44.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44 In his article on Thomas Hirschhorn, Buchloh examines the way Hirschhorn succeeds in avoiding such traps through alternative sites of display and the use of detritus and throw-away

reduced the sculptural project of Hesse, Serra, Smithson *et al*, to 'radical neutrality' that concerns me here, but his claim that they perform mere repetition of earlier generations' work. What are the consequences of that process of emptying out? Who, or what, returns to fill the remaindered space or vacuum? The return or persistence of those earlier models needs recasting, as the resurfacing of prior models, however renegotiated, involves more than merely a replaying of its main themes. Rather, it engenders an ambivalent situation of influence and continuation that is necessarily fraught with unease and anxiety.<sup>64</sup>

The 'anxiety of influence' is literary critic Harold Bloom's term for a specific kind of anxiety that plagues younger generations of poets. Originating in Bloom's work, with the writing of Shakespeare, the 'anxiety of influence' finds its expression in the way later poets or followers incorporate or assimilate the precursor's lessons, how they interpret and negotiate their way through and beyond earlier works.<sup>65</sup> This is

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consumer goods. He ultimately seeks to both demonstrate and, with his temporary, worthless works or installations, to work through the 'universal condition of the commodity'. Indeed, to an extent Hirshhorn's work is both inflected with and avoids its own commodification. Buchloh's claim that the epigone-like work of artists such as Whiteread and Smith is a result of the emptying out of the once radical, politically emancipatory aspect of their predecessors such as Hesse, Serra and Smithson, whose 'Post-minimal' or Process works of art sought to 'transcend all forms of pre-established conventions, stylistic morphologies, and aesthetic norms in the pure and spontaneous practice of embodied perception', *Ibid.*, p. 43-44. See chapter three for a comparison between Buchloh's use of the term 'bricolage' in relation to installation works and my deployment of the concept in connection with the work of H.C. Westermann.

<sup>64</sup> In his article 'The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde', *October*, no. 37, Summer 1986, pp. 41-52, Buchloh describes the model of repetition that occurs between the historical avant-garde, Peter Bürger's term for the so-called 'genuine' avant-garde artists working in the period 1910-1925 and the neo-avant-garde or post-war artists. The historical avant-garde sought to criticise the concept of autonomy, whilst the neo-avant-garde managed only to institutionalise the avant-garde 'as art', in terms of the Freudian understanding of repetition as disavowal and repression. In this article the notion of originality is put under pressure, and issues of repetition or return to previous models is understood in a far more nuanced way that, Buchloh claims, 'cannot be discussed in terms of influence, imitation, and authenticity alone'. p. 43 I do not want to claim only a lineage informed by conscious repetition of previous models of working either. The model of inheritance and influence I am outlining in this chapter shares Buchloh's scepticism about originary moments of modernist artistic practice, although I want to push further the psychoanalytic implications of that model of return that Buchloh refers to. His claim that Whiteread and Smith are 'retrograde' epigones clearly stems from his earlier position in relation to the relative radicality of the neo-avant-garde and the avant-garde.

<sup>65</sup> In his book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, op.cit., Harold Bloom cites the different ways in which later generations struggle to negotiate their way into new and original ways of writing

achieved through a variety of revisionary strategies, one of which Bloom calls 'kenosis', which involves the emptying out of one's predecessor, a kind of deflationary practice allowing the later poet to distance themselves in a movement toward discontinuity with the precursor, what we might think about in terms of a traumatic separation. The strategy of kenosis shares much with Buchloh's account of Whiteread and Smith's work.<sup>66</sup> Bloom claims the cause of the 'anxiety of influence' is the 'poetic father', or 'voice of the other'.<sup>67</sup> This voice, Bloom states 'cannot die because already it has survived death—the dead poet lives in one',<sup>68</sup> a kind of 'family romance' that I am here reformulating in relation to the series of connections, or triangulations of artists that instead speak more of a 'family secret', in Abraham and Torok's terminology, of inheritance. Bloom's evocation of the return of the dead is an interestingly nuanced counter to Buchloh's model of epigones recuperating previous strategies, and finds its psychoanalytic analogue in Nicolas Abraham's theory of the phantom.<sup>69</sup>

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since Shakespeare, the origin of the 'anxiety of influence' and yardstick against which all who come after are judged. Although flawed in many ways, Bloom's account is a brilliant piece of transgenerational research in which he outlines six possible ways in which later 'strong poets' perform poetic misreadings of their precursors, as a means of dealing with the anxiety of influence they necessarily inherit. The six 'revisionary ratios', or methods of misreading are as follows: *Clinamen*, misreading properly, to 'swerve' away from the precursor as a corrective manoeuvre, at the point the precursor should have done themselves; *Tessera*, to complete the 'parent poem' from fragments, as though completing a project/poem only half-finished; *Kenosis*, a 'breaking-device' that involves a break or movement toward discontinuity with the precursor, so that they are 'emptied out' of the poem; *Daemonization*, where the later poet opens him or herself to a 'power' in the parent-poem not actually there in the first instance. This is a means of generalising away the uniqueness of the original poem by distancing itself slightly from its original intent or 'power'; *Askesis*, a movement of 'self-purgation', unlike the revisionary movement of emptying that occurs in *kenosis*, the later poet instead cuts him or herself off entirely from all others, including the precursor, a point of truncation, or curtailing; *Apophrades*, or return of the dead. At a moment in their later career, the poet opens his poem totally to the precursor, so that it appears to have almost been written by the precursor, as it returns so closely to their own, earlier, work, so 'we might believe the wheel has come full circle'. It has the uncanny effect of seeming to have been written by the precursor themselves. pp. 14-15. See chapters 1-6 for fuller accounts of the six revisionary ratios.

<sup>66</sup> See footnote 54, above, for an outline of this revisionary strategy of 'emptying', what Bloom terms *kenosis*, an uncanny procedure of 'repetition and discontinuity', *Ibid.*, p. 77-93.

<sup>67</sup> Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, New York and Oxford, 1975, p. 19.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Although originally theorised by Nicolas Abraham, the concept of the transgenerational phantom was also taken up by Maria Torok, who continues to pursue the implications of that model today.

When Bloom outlines the anxiety of the later poet who must return to the precursor in order to reveal and do battle with them, he invokes the concept of the family romance, a fundamentally Oedipal process of overcoming one's father in order to develop and move on. Bloom describes the process of returning to one's precursor as a poetic act of misreading, or misprision, meaning to swerve away. The point of a strong poetic reading is to perform this swerve away, or 'clinamen' at the point the precursor should have done. What Bloom and Abraham's account share is the importance placed on the listener, the critic or analyst who must learn to listen for the voice of the precursor in order to make proper sense of the later poet. Bloom's task of listening finds echoes in Abraham and Torok's own project, which they liken to the task of listening to poetry, asking, 'Do analysts have an ear for *all* "poems" and for *all* "poets"?'<sup>70</sup> Rather than 'wrestling with the dead', Bloom envisages critics as 'more nearly necromancers, straining to hear the dead rising',<sup>71</sup> a 'straining to hear' that, for Abraham and Torok, is subject always to potential failure, resulting in analysands returning as 'the haunting phantoms of the analyst's deficiency'.<sup>72</sup> This point finds its formal realisation in the oddly inert figure of Westermann's 1961 work *Hard of Hearing Object* (Ill. 4.36) comprising the full set of 'Westermann' motifs: a box, a metal megaphone-shape that amplifies nothing, a blocked off, inaccessible house, shut-off pipes, metal bolts and a base. These intractable objects or shapes are mounted on the base as though a declaration, or statement that in fact declares, or reveals, nothing. It is hard to 'get', or, in the aural register Westermann, and myself are invoking, it is hard to 'hear'.

It is not a case of their being simply epigones of past practices that persists in the work of Nauman and Whiteread; if it were, they would not be such compelling and interesting artists. They must not be understood as mere followers. These artists have

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<sup>70</sup> Abraham and Torok, ' "The Lost Object—Me": Notes on Endocryptic Identification', in op.cit., p. 139.

<sup>71</sup> Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, op.cit., p. 65.

<sup>72</sup> Abraham and Torok, ' "The Lost Object—Me": Notes on Endocryptic Identification', in op.cit., p. 139.

not simply returned full circle to an earlier moment of artistic practice, to a prior problem, but have performed, unwittingly or not, a *detournement*, to use the Situationist term, that gives the work its specificity and imbues the homage with such authority. Once again, it is the trajectory of the spiral, that spins out and away from a fixed point, rather than the circle which returns and repeats endlessly, that offers the most useful means of articulating this situation.

Recent writers have compellingly argued that the history of Modernism is one shot through with instances of return, repetition, blind spots and rupture, what I described as Modernism's 'phantoms' in the introduction to this thesis. The phantom, as Abraham writes, 'gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization', a seemingly apt description of many avant-garde practices of the twentieth century.<sup>73</sup> My claim, however, is not to merely designate seemingly anomalous artists such as Westermann as Modernism's phantoms. Rather, what the phantom effect allows for is a tentative systematisation of that moment of sculptural production in the sixties which puts pressure on the standard narratives, emphasising the role of secrecy and return as explanations for, if not answers to, those gaps and breaks that such narratives necessarily reveal. Rather than the phantom being something that explains (away) discrepancies, it seems to instead describe a problem, both in psychic life, and in sculptural practice, as the inheritance or acknowledgment of another seems to necessarily impinge upon one's own practice even at the cost, as we have seen with homage works of Westermann, of the artists' own subjectivity.

The phantom stands for a secret trauma or situation unwittingly inherited from another, usually parental figure, that becomes lodged in the subject as though a crypt within their unconscious, functioning then as a blockage or impenetrable kernel. Harboured within the subject, this phantom is only revealed in those breaks, gaps, discontinuities and 'cuts' in the subject's discourse. Inhabited by the phantom of another, a generational delay comes to the fore, in which the buried secret can only be

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<sup>73</sup> Abraham, 'Notes on the Phantom', in *Ibid*, p. 189.

articulated at a later stage. These generational 'cuts' that sever the traditional patriarchal lineage of tradition and inheritance demand an alternative model of interaction and understanding in which we must learn 'to listen for the voices of one generation in the unconscious of another'.<sup>74</sup> The phantom is not understood in this context in terms of a return of the repressed, for that which has been repressed is not known to the haunted subject, they carry only the secret of that trauma. Instead, the phantom effect is rather 'like a stranger within the subject's own topography'.<sup>75</sup>

Although deliberately engaging with the work of Westermann in his homage works, the way in which Westermann 'haunted' his work was not wholly accounted for by Nauman, specifically in terms of the loss of Nauman himself from the piece that Westermann's presence demanded. Rather than make his 'Westermann' works 'in the name of' Westermann, Westermann instead figured in the work at the places Nauman sought to put himself, using his own body. Similarly in the work of Whiteread we see the humorous casts of spaces by Nauman and spare, empty boxes of Minimalism turned instead into morgue tables, beds, wardrobes: the work of both Nauman and Minimalism and, I argue, also Westermann, returns awry in Whiteread's work. Played out in a different register, the reinvestment of those spaces as fundamentally haunted, phantomatic sites demonstrates that, impacted within these contemporary works of Whiteread might be an alternative, secret world of sculptural practice, borne out through a generational delay in which Westermann can be seen to 'cut' into the work of Whiteread, or be found secreted within it; a thematics of secrecy is entrenched deep within these objects.

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If the work of Westermann is the secret that haunts the work of Whiteread, then the model of investigation that such a claim provides could enable a wholly new

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<sup>74</sup> Nicholas Rand, 'Secrets and Posterity: The Theory of the Transgenerational Phantom', in *The Shell and the Kernel*, op.cit., p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> Abraham, 'Notes on the Phantom', Ibid., p. 173.

approach to the way in which stylistic change and formation can be tracked. Rather than use this method as a way of accounting for such occurrences I want to instead posit the phantom effect as a problem in sculptural histories. The phantom effect cannot resolve problems either in psychic life or artistic practice, but instead points to them, as they function on the site of sculpture *as* problems enabling a renegotiation of those earlier models and artists that have since been lost, or secreted within those histories. This position would not work so well were it to point to the more overt influences that seem to be at work in an artist's work. For example, it is a less fruitful endeavour to simply track the influence of Minimalism upon Whiteread. Rather, it is the moments in which the discrepancies come to light. Both Nauman's brief but intensive engagement with the work of other artists, and Whiteread's positive casting from her own body, have each been found to be pivotal moments in these artists' works, planted at an early stage that only retrospectively come to 'mean' in the way I have been describing.

The point of the phantom effect is not the reinsertion of since-lost artists back into the histories of the moment, but to use the problem of the phantom in order to point out that those artists were *already there*, as blockages, or 'secrets' that found their articulation, or were 'heard' only later, through that generational delay, whether as a celebratory, heretical, commemorative, ambivalent or even unconscious. As a way of working through the complexities of artistic inheritance, the notion of the phantom may go some way in helping us articulate alternative models of critical writing that incorporate the breakdowns and failures both in those histories and objects themselves which haunt it. Just as the analysand 'whose message they failed to hear', goes on to haunt the analyst, so too, those objects that have been 'listened to time after time—the riddles with no key'<sup>76</sup> which refuse to yield up 'the distinctive *oeuvre*

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<sup>76</sup> Abraham and Torok, ' "The Lost Object—Me": Notes on Endocryptic Identification', in *Ibid.*, p. 139.

of their lives', <sup>77</sup> return as phantoms to haunt those critical writings and later histories of the period in which they are encrypted.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



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